

# MAHATMA GANDHI

VOLUME IX

BOOK-TWO

The Last Phase

Part-I

PYARELAL



NAVAJIVAN PUBLISHING HOUSE  
AHMEDABAD-380 014




## DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD

*in his introduction writes :*

THE AUTHOR of these pages, for a long time Mahatma Gandhi's private secretary and, after Mahadev Desai's death, editor of the *Harijan* weeklies, which Gandhiji was conducting, needs no introduction. His writings in *Young India* and *Harijan* and several works by him on Mahatma Gandhi published in Gandhiji's lifetime and after have well established him as a faithful and authoritative chronicler and interpreter of Gandhiji's life and philosophy. The present book deals with the last phase of Mahatma Gandhi's career. It is thus a continuation of *My Experiments with Truth* written by the Mahatma himself. That book deals largely with what may be called the formative period of his life, when he was preparing himself for the great work that lay ahead of him. The present book covers the story of the last years of his life in which the results of all the experiments that he carried out throughout his career were put to their severest and final test. India achieved independence but at the cost of her unity. This was not the independence that Gandhiji or Congress had set out to achieve. But Gandhiji saw in it no reason for despair; it was not non-violence that had failed but their practice of non-violence or rather his technique in inculcating the non-violence of his conception on the people. He set about to remedy the flaw. Some of the most fascinating pages of the book are devoted to describing the working of his mind  
(Continued on back flap)





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## MAHATMA GANDHI — THE LAST PHASE



*By the same Author*

THE EPIC FAST

STATUS OF INDIAN PRINCES

A PILGRIMAGE FOR PEACE

A NATION BUILDER AT WORK

GANDHIAN TECHNIQUES IN THE MODERN WORLD

THOREAU, TOLSTOY AND GANDHIJI

THE SANTINIKETAN PILGRIMAGE

TOWARDS NEW HORIZONS

MAHATMA GANDHI—THE EARLY PHASE, Vol. I



# MAHATMA GANDHI THE LAST PHASE

VOLUME IX

BOOK - TWO

*by*  
PYARELAL



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To  
MAHADEV DESAI

*I recognise no God except the God that is to  
be found in the hearts of the dumb millions. . . .  
And I worship the God that is Truth . . . through  
the service of these millions.*

MAHATMA GANDHI



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# MAHATMA GANDHI — THE LAST PHASE





PART ONE  
A CHALLENGE TO FAITH





## CHAPTER I

### THE FIRST LESSON

#### 1

CALCUTTA WAS still burning when Gandhiji left Delhi for Noakhali. The fire had never completely been put out since August, 1946. Gandhiji and party were even warned to be prepared against acid-bulbs that might be hurled through the car windows on detraining at Calcutta. Friends tried to argue with Gandhiji: Was it right for him to expose himself to such risk? And in any case, what protection could his unarmed presence in Noakhali give to the riot-victims?

"I do not know what I shall be able to do there," said Gandhiji to a very esteemed friend, who made an eleventh hour effort to dissuade him from setting out on his hazardous venture. "All I know is that I won't be at peace with myself unless I go there."<sup>1</sup> He then proceeded to descant on the power of thought. There are two kinds of thoughts — idle and active. There may be myriads of the former swarming in one's brain like motes in a sun-beam. They are like unfertilised eggs. They do not count. "But one active thought, proceeding from the depths, in its nascent purity and endowed with all the undivided intensity of one's being, can become dynamic and make history." He did not feel like repressing the spontaneous urge which he felt within him to go to the people of Noakhali.

Addressing the prayer gathering on the eve of his departure, Gandhiji remarked that it was a long and difficult journey on which he was setting out and he was in poor health. But one had to do one's duty and trust in God to make the way smooth. He requested people not to crowd at the stations on the way. India had given him enough affection. It needed no further demonstration. He was not going to Bengal to pass judgment on anybody; he was going there as God's servant, and one who was God's servant had to be the servant of all His creation.

The journey proved to be as strenuous as many had feared. There were mammoth crowds at all big stations on the way. At places it was like a swarming ant-heap of humanity as far as the eye could reach. The crowd clambered on the roofs of the carriages, choked the windows, broke glass, smashed the shutters and yelled and shouted till one's ears split. They pulled the alarm-chain again and again for *darshan*, making it necessary to disconnect the vacuum brakes. The station authorities tried to drive them away by training the water hose on them from the overhead hydrant. It made no difference to them; it only flooded the



compartment. Later in the evening, Gandhiji sat with his fingers thrust into his ears to keep out the shouting when it became unbearable. But when it was proposed to him that the lights in the compartment might be switched off to discourage *darshan*-seekers, he turned down the suggestion by saying that the simple faith of the masses demanded that he should serve them with the last ounce of his energy and never put personal comfort before what he considered to be his duty towards them.

The train arrived at Calcutta five hours behind time. From the station he was driven straight to Satish Chandra Das Gupta's Khadi Pratisthan Ashram at Sodepur—10 miles away from the city. A gathering of several hundred had been waiting for him there for nearly two hours for the evening prayer. He apologised to them for the delay. He had come to Calcutta, he said, not with any set plan, but with a blank mind to do God's will. He would indicate to him the next step.

The next day, he made the importance of prayer the theme of his evening address. In the venture on which he was setting forth, prayer was to be more and more his instrument of action. He was going to present it to countless men and women as a panacea for fear—to make the weak strong. The exemplary patience with which the gathering had waited for him although he was late on account of his engagement with the Governor, therefore, filled him with joy and faith, and confidence in regard to the task before him. He regarded it as a happy augury.

Before Gandhiji's departure from Delhi, the Private Secretary to the Viceroy had brought him the draft of a statement condemning violence "by whomsoever committed" and appealing for communal peace, which the Viceroy wanted to be issued over the joint signature of Gandhiji and Jinnah. Gandhiji yielded to none in his desire for communal peace. But this was "parity" with a vengeance! The appeal to have value had to come from the party that had actively preached violence before and justified it after it had broken out. But if the Viceroy could not bring himself to do that, Gandhiji suggested that he should issue the appeal in his own name as the head of the Government charged with special responsibility for the maintenance of law and order. Ultimately, the appeal was issued on behalf of the Viceroy and his Cabinet, which consisted of both the Congress and the Muslim League representatives. Drawing the attention of the people to it, Gandhiji observed in his prayer address on 30th October that they would drag down India's name in the world if they fought among themselves like wild beasts.

\* \* \*

"What would you like me to do?" the Bengal Governor, Mr. Burrows, asked Gandhiji during their meeting. Gandhiji's visit to the Governor was, as far as he was concerned, a courtesy call. "Nothing, Your Excellency," he replied. The Governor's position, during the interim period after the British declaration to quit, was that of a constitutional head. He had to act on the advice of his Ministers. The responsibility



for the administration and the maintenance of peace vested in the Ministers. His business, therefore, said Gandhiji to the Governor, was with the Chief Minister. Similarly, he told General Bucher, G.O.C., Eastern Command, that the role of the army was to assist the civil authority whenever the latter asked for their assistance and to carry out the orders of the Chief Minister and his Cabinet. It was the civil authority, represented by the popular Ministers, that was responsible for law and order, not the military.

Gandhiji's replies were not very much liked either by the Governor or by the General. Nor were they very much in line, one is afraid, with the general trend of feeling among his Congress colleagues in the Government who echoed the general cry for immediate application of the Governor's rule in Bengal and for sending more military aid to the disturbed areas. "Mine may be a voice in the wilderness today," Gandhiji said to the Director of an influential English daily who saw him at Delhi, "but I maintain that so long as British troops are there, both Hindus and Muslims will continue to look to them for help and the trouble will continue. Nothing worse could happen to a people struggling to be free."

"The Britisher would like his troops to go out.... Who obstructs?" asked Gandhiji's interviewer, shocked.

"Who else but the British themselves?" replied Gandhiji.

After some parrying, the friend admitted that the British commercial and other vested interests in India and their henchmen stood in the way of their withdrawal, but maintained his position in regard to the use of the British troops. "You say, there can be no peace while they are here. Yet everyday there is an increasing demand for them for the maintenance of peace. The complaint is that they are not sufficiently used."

"That is the very reason," answered Gandhiji, "why they should be withdrawn.... When they are used to maintain law and order it is after the trouble. Order will be restored in East Bengal, too. But after what slaughter, what suffering!"

"No," Gandhiji concluded, "the British troops are in India not to protect India but to protect British interests which were imposed on India and which are now so well entrenched that even the British Government cannot dislodge them. The British did not come here as philanthropists, nor is there any altruism in their continued stay here or the continuing presence of their troops, all that might be said to the contrary notwithstanding."<sup>2</sup>

Returning from the meeting with the Governor, as Gandhiji's car drove through the deserted streets with garbage-heaps at places banked up nearly two feet high against the pavements, and rows of gutted shops and burnt-out houses in the side-streets and lanes extending as far as the eye could reach, he was overcome by a sinking feeling at the mass



madness that could turn man into less than the brute. The only consolation was that such a state of things could not last. Human nature would not stand it. Already there seemed to be signs of a revulsion. A prominent Muslim Leaguer had seen him in the course of the day and said to him: "We must reach our goal, whatever it might be — Pakistan or undivided India, without bloodshed or fighting. I go so far as to say that if Pakistan cannot be reached except through bloodshed and fighting amongst ourselves, it is not worth having."<sup>3</sup>

A nostalgic note ran through his evening prayer address as he reminisced how to make peace between the quarrelling parties had been his vocation from his early youth. Even while he practised as a lawyer, he used to help parties to settle their disputes out of court. Why could not the two communities be brought together in India? But, whether they decided to stay together or part, they must do so with goodwill and understanding.

"Why do you want to go to Noakhali? You did not go to Bombay, Ahmedabad or Chapra?" a Muslim friend came and asked Gandhiji. Was it because in other places it was the Muslims who were the sufferers, whereas in Noakhali the sufferers were Hindus? Would not his going to Noakhali in the circumstances add to the existing tension between Hindus and Muslims in India? Gandhiji replied that he would certainly have gone to any of the places mentioned by the friend, if anything approaching what had happened in Noakhali had happened there and if he felt that he could do nothing for those places without being on the spot. It was the cry of outraged womanhood that peremptorily called him to Noakhali. He had decided not to leave Bengal until the last embers of the trouble were stamped out. "I may stay on here for a whole year or more. If necessary, I will die here. But I will not acquiesce in failure. If the only effect of my presence in the flesh is to make people look up to me in hope and expectation which I can do nothing to vindicate, it would be far better that my eyes were closed in death."<sup>4</sup>

This was the first indication he gave to the public of the "Do or Die" resolve that was shaping in his mind. His next remark showed that he had already burnt his boats. He had prepared himself, he said, to absent himself from the forthcoming Congress session which was scheduled to be held in the last week of November at Meerut and had mentally disengaged himself from all his responsibilities in respect of Sevagram Ashram, and Uruli Kanchan nature-cure centre—his latest love.

## 2

Yet with all his impatience to get to Noakhali as quickly as possible, four more days elapsed before Gandhiji could actually leave Calcutta. They turned out to be the most fruitful period in his mission.



The Muslim festival of Baqr-Id, when the Muslims, in commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice, sacrifice cows, was close at hand and the possibility of a communal clash could not be dismissed. The Chief Minister of Bengal suggested that Gandhiji should extend his stay in Calcutta to consolidate the peace in the city at least till Baqr-Id was over. What was the use of proceeding to Noakhali while Calcutta was burning? There were people who distrusted the *bona fides* of the Chief Minister, whom they held to be the one man responsible for the Great Calcutta Killing and other misdeeds too numerous to mention. They represented to Gandhiji that his suggestion was only a trick to delay his going to Noakhali if it could not be prevented altogether; that on the Baqr-Id day the riot-victims in Noakhali, who had been forcibly converted to Islam, and were now marooned, might be made to slaughter cows and eat beef and so on. But all these arguments did not impress Gandhiji. To him they smacked of fear and distrust. Non-violence knew neither. He would trust the Chief Minister and take his proposal on its face value. He could not begin by distrusting the person whom he was out to convert by his love.

There was method in that madness. If he extended his stay in Calcutta at the request of Shaheed Suhrawardy to consolidate the peace in the city, he reasoned, it would mean that the onus of maintaining the peace of Noakhali during that interval would rest upon Shaheed. Shaheed had given his solemn assurance on that score. It would put him on his honour. But supposing Shaheed failed to keep his promise, said Gandhiji, he would take that risk. It was an article of faith with him that if we trust our opponent with our eyes open and not out of fear, even when there is ground for distrust, the opponent will in the end reciprocate our trust, provided we act consistently on the square to the last. He had followed that principle throughout his life. In South Africa, General Smuts had begun by distrusting him but had found that in spite of it Gandhiji always trusted him and kept his word hundred per cent. In the end, General Smuts melted and became one of his best friends.

Gandhiji had known the Bengal Chief Minister from the good old Khilafat days. Shaheed at that time used to take pride in calling himself his "son". If only he could re-awaken that chord in him! And why not? So he decided paradoxically to begin his mission in Noakhali by refraining from going to Noakhali and to conquer the person who, in the popular imagination, was *fons et origo* of the Noakhali trouble by going into his pocket! And this was done with the naturalness and grace of a man who has seen human nature in all its aspects, identified himself with each one of them and transcended them all.

"How is it Shaheed Saheb, everybody calls you the chief of the goondas? Nobody seems to have a good word to say about you!" Gandhiji began his first meeting with his would-be collaborator, as the latter impudently reclined on his elbow at full-length before him in his



characteristic Bohemian style.

“Mahatmaji, don’t people say things about you, too, behind your back?” replied Shaheed nonchalantly.

“That may be,” replied Gandhiji laughing. “Still there are at least some who call me Mahatma. But I have not heard a single person calling you, Shaheed Suhrawardy, a Mahatma!”

Without turning a hair Shaheed replied: “Mahatmaji, don’t believe what people say about you in your presence!”

Gandhiji’s jokes were never without a purpose. He held in common with Aristotle’s ancient sage that “humour was the only test of gravity; and gravity of humour” and that “a subject which would not bear raillery was suspicious; and a jest which would not bear a serious examination was certainly false wit.”<sup>5</sup> He could not expect to convert Shaheed if he hid from him what people were saying about him. Absolute frankness was the precondition for mutual trust. By his good-humoured joust with Shaheed, he showed that in him there was no forbidding Mahatma but one who could give as well as take. It broke the ice completely between them and enabled each to meet the whole man in the other. Thereafter Shaheed knew that he could love the man who knew him to the core and had the courage to tell him to his face what he knew, without detracting from the affection he bore towards him.

In the succeeding days they hammered out a formula for the establishment of communal harmony in Bengal, which later became the corner-stone of Gandhiji’s peace mission in Noakhali. The signatories to that formula constituted themselves into a peace committee, composed of an equal number of Hindus and Muslims for the whole of Bengal with the Chief Minister as the chairman, to bring about communal peace in the Province, “a peace not imposed from without by the aid of the military and the police but by spontaneous heart-felt effort.” Fundamentals of far-reaching importance were embodied in their joint declaration: “It is our certain conviction that Pakistan cannot be brought about by communal strife nor can India be kept whole through the same means. It is also our conviction that there can be no conversion or marriage by force; nor has abduction any place in a society which has any claim to be called decent or civilised.” The Chief Minister, as the chairman of the committee, gave the guarantee that the Government of Bengal would implement the decisions of the Committee.

Some people picked holes in the document on the ground that neither the Hindus, who were the aggrieved party, nor the Congress was given a majority in the committee; others objected to the Chief Minister holding the balance in his hand by virtue of his casting vote as the chairman of the committee. But Gandhiji met all these objections by saying that the committee was not intended to be used as an arena for a communal or political tussle but a platform for united action by groups that



had come together to work for a common goal, viz., that of achieving communal peace based on the unity of hearts. The significance of the formula, in his eyes, consisted in the fact that both sides had agreed to rule out force and violence even in the settlement of issues on which they fundamentally differed, e.g., Pakistan. It further embodied the vital principle that religion could not sanctify any breach of fundamental morality. It was specifically on the issue whether the marriage of a non-Muslim married woman became null and void the moment she was converted to Islam that the Ali Brothers had parted company with Gandhiji twenty-two years ago. The formula thus provided the key to the solution of the problem not only of Noakhali but the whole of India.

Referring to the talks that he had had with Shaheed, Gandhiji remarked in one of his after-prayer discourses that he knew they had many grievances against the Chief Minister. But he could not disbelieve the assurance which the latter had given that he wanted peace. "The golden way is to be friends with the world and to regard the whole human family as one. He who distinguishes between the votaries of one's own religion and those of another miseducates the members of his own and opens the way for discord and irreligion."<sup>6</sup>

### 3

Before Gandhiji could proceed to Noakhali, Bihar put him to the test. The news about the happenings in Calcutta and Noakhali, like all bad news, had travelled fast and set up a widespread ferment in the neighbouring Province of Bihar, converting it into a vast powder-magazine. The cry for reprisals had already gone forth. Gandhiji was shocked to hear that some Muslims, while fleeing from Bihar in panic, had been set upon and killed by Hindus.

On the 3rd November, the *Morning News*, a Muslim League paper of Calcutta, came out with news about extensive rioting in Bihar. (See Part III). Immediately Gandhiji wired to Pandit Nehru, who with three of his colleagues in the Interim Government, Sardar Patel, Liaquat Ali Khan and Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar, had proceeded to Patna from Calcutta, asking for details. The latter wired back that the situation was tense in many parts, but the Government were doing their utmost to bring it under control. He himself had decided, he added, with Abdur Rab Nishtar, to stay on in Bihar as long as it was necessary.

Revenge was neither the way of peace nor humanity, Gandhiji observed in his prayer address. If they could not be generous enough to forgive a person who gave them a slap, they could give one in return. But supposing the actual perpetrator of the crime ran away and the injured party slapped his relation or his co-religionist by way of retaliation, it would be below human dignity. "If someone abducts my



daughter, am I to abduct his or his friend's daughter? That would be infamous. I am pained beyond measure. The cry of blood for blood is barbarous. You cannot take revenge in Bihar for the happenings in Noakhali."<sup>7</sup>

There was some brisk telephoning between Sodepur Ashram and Patna that night. "Mahatmaji alone can save us," phoned a Muslim League leader of Bihar, Mohammad Yunus, in answer to a trunk call. "Should he start immediately?" I asked. "He is ready." "No," he replied, "there is no immediate need. He can take his time. For the present the presence of Pandit Nehru and other Cabinet Ministers is enough."

"Pretty bad," was Pandit Nehru's reply to a telephone inquiry on behalf of Gandhiji. "But we are rapidly regaining control." "Any crimes against women?" I asked. "They are not absent," he replied.

It was enough to fill Gandhiji's cup of anguish to overflowing. "The Congress belongs to the people. If Congressmen fail to protect Muslims where the Congress is in power, then what is the use of having a Congress Government?" he commented in a written message to the prayer gathering the next day. Similarly, if in a League Province, the League Premier could not afford protection to the Hindus, what business had he to be there? And if either or both of them had to take the aid of the military in order to protect the Muslim or the Hindu minority in their respective Provinces, it only meant that none of them actually exercised any control over the general population in a crisis and both were inviting the British to retain their sovereignty over India. "This is a matter over which all of us should ponder deeply." He deprecated the smug habit of exonerating themselves by blaming it all on the goondas. "We always put the blame on the goondas. But it is we who make the goondas and give them encouragement. It is not correct to say that all the wrong that has been done is the work of the goondas."

He repeated the warning on the 5th November even more forcefully. The Hindus might say: "Did not the Muslims start the trouble?" He wanted them not to succumb to the temptation to retort in that way but to turn the searchlight inward and think of their own duty irrespective of what the other party did. There was a moral code for the use of violence also. If they gave way to the impulse of revenge and retaliation the flames of violence would consume those who lighted them. Independence would vanish into thin air, and a third power, "be it the British or any other," would be firmly planted in India if they continued quarrelling with each other. He did not care if they were all destroyed. But he could not countenance the destruction of India's freedom.

Everybody heaved a sigh of relief when Baqr-Id passed off quietly all over India. But the news from Bihar had set Gandhiji at war with himself. "Principally for reasons of health, soon after coming to Calcutta, I had gone on spare, milkless diet," he wrote in a letter to



Rajkumari Amrit Kaur on the 4th November. "Subsequent happenings in the country induced me to prolong it. Now Bihar will send me to complete fast if things do not radically mend. There will be no time limit. Do not agitate yourself but be really glad that I feel I have the strength to go through the ordeal and live up to my creed." On the following day he wrote to Pandit Nehru:

The news from Bihar has shaken me. My own duty seems to me clear. . . . Although I have striven hard to avert a fast, I can do so no longer. . . . My inner voice tells me, "You may not live to be a witness to this senseless slaughter. If people refuse to see what is clear as daylight and pay no heed to what you say, does it not mean that your day is over?" The logic of the argument is driving me irresistibly towards a fast. I, therefore, propose to issue a statement that unless this orgy of madness ceases, I must go on a fast unto death. . . . You can strive with me, if you think differently. Whatever you say will carry weight with me. But knowing as you do my temperament, I am sure you will approve of my proposed step. In any event, you will go on with your work without a moment's thought about my possible death and leave me in God's good care. No worry allowed.

But neither Pandit Nehru nor Sardar Patel tried to dissuade him. They understood better the magnitude of the stake. It was nothing less than India's independence. Before leaving for Noakhali, on the 6th November, Gandhiji issued a statement and an appeal entitled *To Bihar*:

Bihar of my dreams seems to have falsified them. . . . It is easy enough to retort that things under the Muslim League Government in Bengal were no better, if not worse, and that Bihar is merely a result of the latter. A bad act of one party is no justification for a similar act by the opposing party. . . . Is counter-communalism any answer to the communalism of which Congressmen have accused the Muslim League? Is it nationalism to seek barbarously to crush the fourteen per cent. of the Muslims in Bihar?

I do not need to be told that I must not condemn the whole of Bihar for the sake of the sins of a few thousand Biharis. . . . I am afraid, if the misconduct in Bihar continues, all the Hindus of India will be condemned by the world. That is its way, and it is not a bad way either. . . . Let not Bihar, which has done so much to raise the prestige of the Congress, be the first to dig its grave.

I am in no way ashamed of my Ahimsa. . . . But I do not want in this letter to talk of Ahimsa to you. I do want, however, to tell you that what you are reported to have done . . . is worse than cowardice. It is unworthy of nationalism, or any religion. . . . What you have done is to degrade yourselves and drag down India.

You should say to Pandit Jawaharlalji, Nishtar Saheb and Dr. Rajendra Prasad to take away their military and themselves and attend to the affairs of India. This they can only do if you repent of your inhumanity and assure



them that Muslims are as much your care as your own brothers and sisters.

You should not rest till every Muslim refugee has come back to his home which you should undertake to rebuild and ask your Ministers to help you to do so. You do not know what critics have said to me about your Ministers.

The statement continued: "I regard myself as a part of you. Your affection has compelled that loyalty in me. And since I claim to have better appreciation than you seem to have shown of what Bihari Hindus should do, I cannot rest till I have done some measure of penance."

After setting down the terms of his proposed fast unless the madness in Bihar ceased and the erring Biharis turned over a new leaf, the statement proceeded: "No friend should run to me for assistance or to show sympathy. . . . No sympathetic fast or semi-fast is called for. Such action can only do harm. What my penance should do is to quicken the conscience of those who know me and believe in my *bona fides*. . . . Nothing will happen to me so long as He wants service through the present tabernacle."

Fasting is the most powerful weapon in the armoury of Satyagraha but extremely dangerous on that very account if wrongly used. There are definite rules governing its use. It is not fasting by itself that matters but what lies behind the fast, viz., self-purification. If it is of sufficient intensity, it must result in an all-round purification of society including the opponent. During his fasts, therefore, barring certain exceptions, Gandhiji strongly deprecated sympathetic fasts and called upon all, instead, to cooperate with him by purifying themselves through self-introspection, self-correction and greater diligence in the performance of their duty. The aim was to canalise the emotional energy released by his fast into right action. Sympathetic fasts became an escapist release from the moral obligation which his fast laid on the shoulders of each and all and, therefore, a form of self-dissipation.

Gandhiji's decision to launch on a partial fast and on a total one if things did not mend immediately in Bihar was of the nature of what in military strategy would be called a "containing action". It set him free to pursue his mission in Noakhali. His appeal had an immediate, electrical effect on the Bihar situation. If he succeeded in Noakhali, he reasoned, that in its turn would have a further tranquillising effect on Bihar.

#### 4

Accompanied by Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Minister for Labour, and two Parliamentary Secretaries of the Bengal Government—Nasrullah Khan and Abdur Rashid—whom the Bengal Government had especially deputed to look after his convenience and ensure the cooperation of the local officials during his peace mission in Noakhali, Gandhiji set out from Sodepur on the 6th November, by the special train which



the Chief Minister had arranged. The Chief Minister had intended to accompany him but could not do so on account of "other engagements" in Calcutta. He had also suggested, and Gandhiji had warmly welcomed the idea, that the Chief Minister's daughter as also the daughter of Nasrullah Khan might accompany him on his tour. Both the girls were eager to go. But the plan was abandoned as it was represented to Shaheed that the appearance of unveiled Muslim girls in public with Gandhiji might shock orthodoxy and arouse the opposition of the fanatical Mullas for whom Noakhali was notorious.

There were huge crowds at Kushtia, the home-town of Shamsuddin Ahmed, Goalando and some other stations. In the course of his addresses at these places, Gandhiji recalled how during the Khilafat days he used to say with pride that Maulana Shaukat Ali, the Big Brother, carried him in his pocket. He hoped that as a result of his visit the Hindu-Muslim unity of the Khilafat days would return.

At Goalando, the river journey began. Travelling down the Padma nearly 100 miles by steamer, Gandhiji and party reached Chandpur late at night. An important wire from Sardar Patel awaited him there. He wanted a reply to be sent to Delhi by trunk telephone immediately but none of the telephone circuits was functioning. We tried the military establishment ashore. They could not help either. Obviously the state of things was pretty bad.

The night was passed on the steamer in mid-stream. The next morning, before Gandhiji entrained for Chaumuhani—his destination in Noakhali—two deputations waited on him on board the S.S. Kiwi, one Muslim, the other Hindu. The former deputation consisted of several prominent Muslim Leaguers. They seemed to be in a resentful and acrimonious mood. One of them remarked that no disturbances had taken place in Chandpur sub-division; the rush of refugees to Chandpur was due to panic caused by "false Press propaganda"; the number of Hindus killed by the Muslims was only 15 while double that number of Muslims had died as a result of firing by the military who were mostly Hindus. Another member of the deputation, who was also a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, was bitter over the fact that the Hindus were still fleeing and their rehabilitation was being "obstructed" by Hindu workers who encouraged them to migrate in order to discredit the Muslim League Government and paralyse the administration!

Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Minister accompanying Gandhiji, was present at the meeting along with the two Parliamentary Secretaries. He interposed. It was no use isolating Chandpur sub-division and ignoring what had taken place elsewhere in the district. Equally irrelevant was their reference to the military firing. At last it was Gandhiji's turn to speak. He began: If what they had said was to be taken at its face value, then it amounted to this that the Muslims were innocent; the mischief had all been provoked by false propaganda and excesses by the police



and the military, who, therefore, with the panic-mongering Hindus were the real culprits! That was too big a pill for anybody to swallow. Over-proof was admission. Why had it become necessary to call in the military if no disturbances had taken place? Even Muslim Leaguers had admitted that terrible things had happened; they only disputed the figures. He was not concerned with the numbers. Even if a single case of abduction, forcible conversion or forcible marriage had taken place, it was enough to make every God-fearing man or woman hang down his or her head in shame. The right course was to make a clean breast of the matter. "It is far better to magnify your mistake and proclaim it to the whole world than leave it to the world to point the accusing finger at you. God never spares the evildoer."<sup>8</sup> He had come to promote mutual goodwill and confidence, he proceeded. For this he needed their help. He did not want peace to be established with the help of the police and the military, nor did he wish to encourage people to flee from their homes in East Bengal.

The gentleman, who had spoken first, thereupon admitted that he had heard of "some" cases of arson and looting but the looting had taken place *after* the occupants had fled. The deserted houses offered too strong a temptation to the hooligans.

"But why should people flee from their homes?" asked Gandhiji sharply. "Everybody knows that an unoccupied and unprotected house is bound to be looted by someone or the other. Would anyone risk the loss of all he owns just to discredit the League?"

Still another member of the deputation said that only one per cent. of the people had indulged in acts of hooliganism; the rest — 99 per cent. — were really good people and in no way responsible for the happenings.

That was not a correct way of looking at it, Gandhiji told them. If 99 per cent. who were "good people" had actively disapproved of what had taken place, the one per cent. would have been able to do nothing and could have easily been brought to book. "Good people ought actively to combat the evil to entitle them to that name. Sitting on the fence is no good."<sup>9</sup> If they did not mean it, they should say so and openly tell all the Hindus in the Muslim majority areas to quit. But that was not their position as he understood it. What reply was he to give to the Hindus who asked if Noakhali was an indication of what they were to expect in Pakistan? His respect for the Prophet of Islam was not less than theirs. But authoritarianism and compulsion was the way to corrupt a religion, not to advance it.

Shamsuddin Ahmed agreeing with Gandhiji quoted a verse from the Koran to the effect that there can be no compulsion in religion. He had told the Muslims, he said, that if they wanted Pakistan they must mete out justice to the minority community and win its confidence. By doing what they had done, they had killed Pakistan.



Gandhiji was shown an official notice, issued by Mr. McNerny, the District Magistrate of Noakhali, to the effect that unless the contrary was conclusively proved, he would assume "that anyone who accepted Islam after the beginning of the recent disturbances was forcibly converted and in fact remained a Hindu." Referring to it, Gandhiji said that if all the Muslims endorsed that declaration, it would go a long way to settle the question. Why should there be a public show of it, if anybody genuinely felt inclined to recite the Kalima? A heart conversion needed no other witness than God. It was, therefore, up to the leaders of the Muslims to declare that forcible or mechanical repetition of a formula did not make a non-Muslim a Muslim.

One of them, thereupon, remarked that on their part they were all prepared to go into the interior along with the Hindu leaders to restore peace but the latter were not prepared to trust them. Gandhiji said that did not matter. "You and I shall visit every village and every home in the interior and restore peace and confidence."<sup>10</sup>

The members of the deputation had come with their minds full of prejudice. They had expected to be met by a hail of fire and brimstone. They were surprised to find that, while Gandhiji did not hesitate to point out to them where the Muslims had erred, he had not an angry word against the Muslims as such. What was more, he had expressed himself against the employment of the military and the police and the mass migration of the Hindus. Surely, this man could not be their enemy.

The other deputation consisted of a group of about 20 Hindu workers. Some of them were prominent Congressmen of the district. The group included several representatives of various relief organisations also. "If you say you cannot do without police or military protection," Gandhiji said to them, "you really confess defeat even before the battle has begun. No police or military in the world can protect people who are cowards. What goes against the grain in me is that a single individual can be forcibly converted or a single woman kidnapped or molested. So long as you feel you *can* be subjected to these indignities, you *shall* continue to be so subjected. Your trouble is not numerical inferiority but the feeling of helplessness that has seized you and the habit of depending on others. That is why I am opposed to the idea of your migrating from East Bengal *en masse*. It is no cure for impotence or helplessness."

"East Bengal is opposed to such a move," they replied.

Gandhiji continued: "Twenty thousand able-bodied men prepared to die like brave men non-violently might today be regarded as a fairy-tale. But it would be no fairy-tale for every able-bodied man in a population of twenty thousand to die to a man like stalwart soldiers in open fight. They would go down in history like the immortal five hundred who made Thermopylæ. I will proclaim from the house-tops,"



he added, "that it is the only condition under which you can live in East Bengal."

The members of the deputation demanded that Muslim officers, Muslim police and Muslim military in the area should be replaced by Hindu in order to restore confidence amongst the Hindus. Gandhiji told them, it was a false cry. Hindu officers, Hindu police and Hindu military had in the past done against their Hindu brethren all the things that they had complained of. "I come from Kathiawad—the land of petty principalities. No woman's honour is safe in some of these principalities and the chief is no hooligan but a duly anointed one."

"These are cases of individual depravity. Here we have this on a mass scale."

"But the individual there is not alone. He is backed by the machinery of his little State."

"He is condemned by his compeers. Here such acts are commended by the Muslims."

"Words of condemnation may tickle your ears; they are no consolation to the unfortunate women whose homes have been laid desolate, or who have been abducted, forcibly converted and forcibly married. What a shame for Hindus, what a disgrace for Islam! No, I am not going to leave you in peace. Presently you will ask yourselves: 'When will this old man leave us and go?' But this old man will *not* go. He did not come on your invitation and he will go only on his own, but with your blessings, when his mission in East Bengal is fulfilled."

"These disturbances are a part of the Muslim League's plan for Pakistan."

"It is midsummer madness and they have realised it. They will soon sicken of it. They have already begun to."

"Then, why do not they come here and set things right?"

"That stage will come. Sickness marks the crisis. Crisis must precede cure. You see I am a nature-curist!" he added with a laugh referring to the well-known nature-cure theory that "intensification of symptoms" as a result of elimination of morbid matter from the system is a precursor of cure.

"Here we are a mere drop in the ocean," remarked another friend resuming the discussion.

Gandhiji replied that even if there were only one Hindu in East Bengal, he wanted him to have the courage to go and live in the midst of the Muslims and die, if he must, like a hero. He would then command the admiration even of the Muslims. "There is not a man, however cruel and hard-hearted, but would give his admiration to a brave man. A goonda is not the vile man he is imagined to be. He is not without his redeeming features."

The company included a number of young men who had been members of a terrorist group that had successfully organised a raid on



the Chittagong armoury, with a daring and courage which had extorted the admiration even of the British officials and made the editor of an Anglo-Indian daily of Calcutta to remark in his paper that with such young men he could hunt tigers. The friend who was leading the argument was a member of that group. He was still unconvinced: "A goonda does not understand reason."

"But he understands bravery. If he finds that you are braver than he, he will respect you."

"You will note," Gandhiji continued, "that for the purpose of our present discussion I have not asked you to discard the use of arms. I cannot provide you arms. It is not for me to provide arms to the Chittagong armoury raid men. The most tragic thing about the armoury raid people is that their bravery was lop-sided. It did not infect others."

"No wonder it could not," put in one of the party. "They were condemned."

"By whom?"

"By the people."

"No, the people did not. I may have, but that is a different thing."

"I am an armoury raid man myself."

"You are no armoury raid man or you would not have lived to tell me these things. That so many of you should have remained living witnesses to the things that have happened here is in my eyes a tragedy of the first magnitude. If you had shown the same fearlessness and courage to face death in the present crisis as at the time of that raid, you would have gone down in history as heroes. As it is, you have only inscribed a small footnote in the page of history. You will see I am not asking you just now to follow my type of heroism. I have not made it good hundred per cent. even in my own case. I have come here to test it out in East Bengal. I want you to take to conventional type of heroism. You should be able to infect others, both men and women, with the courage and fearlessness that are needed to face death when the alternative is dishonour and humiliation. Thus only can the Hindus stay in East Bengal, not otherwise. After all, the Muslims are blood of our blood and bone of our bone."

"The proportion of Muslims and Hindus here is 6 to 1. How can you expect us to face such heavy odds?"

"When India was brought under British subjection, there were only 70,000 European soldiers against 33 crores of Indians."

"We have no arms. The hooligans have the backing of Government bayonets."

That gave Gandhiji the opportunity to describe to them the superiority of Satyagraha or soul-force over conventional weapons in the face of overwhelming odds. The Indian community in South Africa was a mere handful in the midst of an overwhelming majority of Europeans and Negroes. "The Europeans had arms. We had none. So we forged

the weapon of Satyagraha. Today the Indian is respected by the White man in South Africa, not so the Zulu with all his fine physique."

"So, we are to fight with arms anyhow?" the ex-terrorist friend finally remarked.

"Not anyhow," Gandhiji replied. "Even violence has its code of ethics. For instance, to butcher helpless old men, women and children is not bravery but rank cowardice. Chivalry requires that they should be protected even at the cost of one's life. The history of early Islam is replete with such instances of chivalry and Islam is all the stronger for it."

"Would you permit the Hindus to take the offensive?"

"The people of Bihar did that and brought disgrace upon themselves and India. I have heard it said that the retaliation in Bihar has 'cooled' the Muslims down. They mean it has cowed them down for the time being. They do not know, Bihar has set the clock of Indian independence backward. The independence of India is today at stake in Bengal and Bihar. The British Government entrusted the Congress with power at the Centre not because they were in love with the Congress but because they had faith that the Congress would use it wisely and well. Today Pandit Nehru finds the ground slipping from under his feet. But he won't let that happen. That is why he is in Bihar."

"Use your arms well, if you must," he concluded. "Do not ill use them. Bihar has not used its arms well. . . . It is the privilege of arms to protect the weak and the helpless. The best succour that Bihar could have given to the Hindus of East Bengal would have been to guarantee with their own lives the absolute safety of the Muslim population living in their midst. Their example would then have told. And I have faith that they will still do so with due repentance when the present madness has passed away. At any rate, that is the price I have put upon my life, if they want me to live. Here ends the first lesson."



## CHAPTER II

### A VENTURE IN FAITH

#### 1

LAKSHAM WAS the next big halt. Laksham constitutes the apex of the triangle with Noakhali and Chandpur as the base to which the Noakhali disturbances were more or less confined. Here there was a big refugee camp. And it was to the refugees assembled at the railway station that Gandhiji's words were addressed. He had vowed himself, he declared, not to leave Bengal till peace was restored and even a solitary Hindu girl was not afraid to move about freely in the midst of the Muslims. The greatest help they could give him was to banish fear from their hearts. And what was the talisman that could do it for them? It was Ramanama or God's name. "God resides in the hearts of the pure always. If you walk in fear of Him, you need fear no-one on earth. Why should you be afraid of the cry of Allah-o-Akbar? The Allah of Islam is the same as the Rama of Hindus—the protector of the innocent. If you believe in Ramanama you will not think of leaving East Bengal. To run away from danger instead of facing it is to deny one's faith in man and God and even oneself. It were better far to drown oneself than live to declare such bankruptcy of faith."

The party reached Chaumuhani on the afternoon of the 7th November. Sucheta Kripalani, the intrepid wife of the Congress President, who had recently returned from her visit to the interior, was disconsolate at the things she had heard and seen. Her report was heart-rending.

An advance party of nearly ten volunteers under Charu Chowdhury, a seasoned Satyagrahi and member of Satish Das Gupta's Ashram at Sodepur, had reached Chaumuhani a week in advance to make arrangements for his arrival there. All was chaos and confusion at Chaumuhani when they first arrived. The town itself had remained free from the disturbance but the whole area around it had been ablaze. There was consternation, anger and demoralisation among all sections. The outer reflected the inner. The place stank after the recent rains. One could hardly move about without holding a kerchief against one's nose. Labour was not to be had for love or money. Nobody was prepared to come forward and help; everybody was filled with fear.

There were several relief organisations at work at Chaumuhani. But there was no common plan of action or co-ordination among them. Refugees were daily fleeing in large numbers; there seemed to be no



end. Others were awaiting the facility of armed escort. There was panic. People met, discussed and argued excitedly and dispersed without advancing an inch. The demoralisation was the greatest among the intelligentsia. Some of them in their impotent rage, blamed all that had happened on Gandhiji's Ahimsa!

Patiently, Charu and his volunteers with the workers of the Noakhali Rescue, Relief and Rehabilitation Committee under Haran Ghosh Chowdhury, member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, set to work to put into operation the technique of constructive work taught by Gandhiji which always proves most effective when the forces of violence are uppermost. It consists in clothing the spirit of non-violence in simple acts of courage, of service and of love which everybody can understand and appreciate. Reduced to its essentials and expressed in a spirit not of bluster or bravado, but of utmost humility with antagonism towards none, non-violence practised in this form becomes like the healing process of nature, imperceptible but extremely active—elemental, all-pervasive and irresistible. The workers issued forth with baskets, brooms and spades, converting themselves into scavengers and day-labourers. A road had to be repaired, a prayer ground to be marked out and levelled, sanitary arrangements to be made. It was a slow and uphill task. But they persevered. As their work progressed and one difficulty after another was overcome, even those who were sceptical to begin with became filled with some of their spirit. The incubus of apathy and despair began imperceptibly to slip away. Some even offered to assist. Even the Muslims began to take interest in and appreciate what the workers were doing against heavy odds. By the time Gandhiji arrived, not only was the road built, the prayer ground ready and the sanitary arrangements in a tip-top condition, it had built up the morale of the affected people in the area as well and introduced a whiff of life-giving fresh air into the choking atmosphere of the place. Slowly order began to emerge from the welter of confusion.

The Bengal Government had adopted elaborate security measures for Gandhiji's protection during his Noakhali tour. The arrival of the armed police and the military with a fleet of jeeps, armoured-cars and trucks created consternation among the local Muslims. The bazar buzzed with rumours. One of them was that Gandhiji had come with a contingent of "goondas"—an expression applied in Noakhali to anyone they do not like! Several prominent local Muslim Leaguers met Gandhiji on his arrival at Chaumuhani. They were agreeably surprised when Gandhiji told them that he was no more enamoured of the police and the military than they.

"How can we create a sense of security and self-confidence in the present state of things?" asked a Hindu young man who saw Gandhiji at Chaumuhani.



"By learning to die bravely. Forget the military and the police. They are broken reeds."

"But we are burning with indignation."

"Then turn your wrath against yourselves."

"To whom are we to appeal—the Congress, the League or the British Government?" asked the friend with a touch of bitterness.

"To none of these. Appeal to yourselves; therefore to God."

"We are men of flesh and blood. We need some material support."

"Then appeal to your own flesh and blood. Purify it of all dross."

A woman worker came to Gandhiji. She was an ex-terrorist. She felt very depressed by the plight of the women. "What is your idea of rehabilitation?" she asked.

"Not to send them to Assam and West Bengal but to infuse courage in them so that they are not afraid to stay in their original homes."

"How is that possible?"

"You must stay in their midst and say to them: 'We shall die to the last person before a hair of your head is injured.' Then you will produce heroines in East Bengal."

"That was once our idea too," rejoined the woman worker.

"I do not mind if each and every one of the 500 families in your area is done to death," continued Gandhiji. "Here you are 20 per cent. of the population. In Bihar the Muslims constitute only 14 per cent. . . ."

"They know they won't be molested there."

"They have been butchered in a more unsufferable manner and there have been cases of molestation of women, too, this time."

"If the Government do not provide rations? . . ."

"There are so many relief organisations. . . . Rations can be purchased but honour and self-respect cannot be bought. I have a feeling that even the Bengal Government do not want this thing to go any further. The lesson has been taught not by Bihar but the vile things done in Bengal. They stand aghast."

The woman worker shedding her initial scepticism exclaimed: "You have opened up a new vista before us, Mahatmaji. We feel fresh blood coursing through our veins."

Chaumuhani had normally a population of not more than 5,000. But on the day of Gandhiji's arrival, there was a crowd of not less than 15,000 at the evening prayer meeting, large numbers having come from the surrounding areas. About eighty per cent. of them were Muslims. Addressing them Gandhiji said that he had come to speak to them not in anger but in sorrow. Ever since he had come to Bengal, he had been hearing awful tales of Muslim atrocities. Shaheed Suhrawardy, all the Ministers of the Bengal Government and the League leaders who had met him in Calcutta had condemned them unequivocally. "They are a blot on the name of Islam. I have studied the Koran. The very word Islam means peace. The Muslim greeting *Salaam Alaikum* (peace be on



you) is the same for all—whether Hindus, Muslims, or any other. Nowhere does Islam permit such things as have happened in Noakhali and Tipperah. The Muslims are in such an overwhelming majority in East Bengal that it is up to them to constitute themselves into the guardians of the small Hindu minority and to tell Hindu women that while they are there, no-one dare cast an evil eye on them.”

Shamsuddin Ahmed, the League Minister, followed it up the next day with a warning that the issue of Pakistan versus Hindustan was not going to be settled by the slaughter of Hindus where Muslims were in a majority and *vice versa*. No Government worth its name could stand silently by and let the majority oppress or exterminate the minority. All that had happened—forcible conversions and the like—was un-Islamic. It was for the Muslims of Noakhali to reassure the Hindus and set them at their ease. The miscreants must be punished for their crimes and it was the duty of the Muslims in general to help the authorities to trace them and bring them to book. He hoped that out of the ashes of the conflagration the edifice of abiding Hindu-Muslim unity would be rebuilt in Bengal.

At night Shamsuddin Ahmed with his colleagues from Calcutta and some local prominent Muslims met Gandhiji and discussed with him the question of the return of the refugees to their respective villages. One of the Muslim friends suggested that in order to restore confidence Hindu leaders should reinforce the appeals of the Muslims to the refugees to go back to their villages. But Gandhiji said that nothing would come out of such an appeal. There must be reasonable security first and the guarantee for it had to come from the Muslims.

## 2

Emerald-green fields of paddy met the eye everywhere on the way as accompanied by the two Parliamentary Secretaries, the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police, Gandhiji set out from Chaumuhani to penetrate into the interior on the 9th November. There had been a bumper crop such as the district had not known for the last twelve years. But nature's bounty was more than offset by the sadistic cruelty of man. The grain was in the ear and about to ripen but the bulk of those who had sown were not there to reap. Some had been killed, others had fled for safety to various refugee camps. The question of the repatriation of the refugees was exercising the minds of the authorities as well as the various relief organisations. Unless the displaced persons returned to their homes quickly, the standing paddy and the betel-nut crops might be lost or stolen in the absence of the owners. The problem bristled with difficulties.

Gopairbag was the first village to be visited. Here, buried deep in thick groves of areca and coconut palms, in a clearing were five



clusters of huts of Hindu families surrounded by nearly fifty times that number of Muslim families. One of these was a rich Patwari's house—his estate being valued at several lakhs of rupees. Silken plantain leaves spread out in graceful arches under a sapphire-blue sky. The loveliness of nature was all around. The air was delightfully fresh and cool. But the human scene that met the eye froze one's blood. One of the worst massacres during the disturbances had taken place here, twenty-one male members out of the total of twenty-three being butchered in cold blood. The two survivors had managed to escape when the massacre took place. In a corner of the courtyard, the corpses of the slaughtered men were said to have been piled up in a heap and burnt. Charred remains of what was once flesh and blood bore witness to the grim tragedy. There were bloodstains on the doorsteps of some of the huts. The kutchra floors in many houses had been dug up, presumably in search of hidden cash or jewels. The odour of death hung strong over the place. It was a picture of utter desolation. The organiser of the massacre was said to be a next-door neighbour, Quasim Ali by name, who had served in the Royal Air Force and was a graduate of a University. He was absconding.

On his way back Gandhiji halted at Dattapara where one of the biggest relief centres in the district was situated. The number of refugees here was above 5,000. In a conference with the District Magistrate, the Superintendent of Police, the Parliamentary Secretaries and some local Muslim League leaders about the repatriation of the evacuees to their homes, Gandhiji took up the thread of the previous evening's discussion. He proposed that in each village one good Hindu and one good Muslim should make themselves responsible for the protection of the refugees who returned to their homes. They should make a solemn declaration that they would sacrifice themselves rather than allow any evil to befall the repatriates. When such a guarantee was forthcoming, the people would go back to their homes. Gandhiji's proposition staggered everybody, the representatives of the riot victims most of all. They had expected that his arrival would mean more police and military, perhaps promulgation of martial law and enforcement of Draconian measures to teach the anti-social elements a lesson, particularly the ring-leaders.

The District Magistrate said, he would have to consult his officers. His Special Relief Officer suggested that the criminal elements should be removed first. Several people present described how they had been looted and forcibly converted. A typical village union was taken up and details of what had happened in that union were invited. The president of the union maintained that he had tried his utmost to keep the peace of his village, but people from "outside" had come and done it, in spite of his efforts to protect his neighbours. One of the Parliamentary Secretaries asked him to speak out frankly and give the names of the culprits who had committed the offences in question. Just then someone from among the company said that the brother of the president of the union



had taken active part in the loot and arson and the president himself had instigated such crimes and was actually present during the looting etc. The union president pleaded that he was innocent. Gandhiji and others could inquire and they would find him not guilty. "There are lots of complaints against you," Gandhiji said to him. "But I am not here to hold a trial or pass judgment. All I can say is that if you have erred, you should confess your error." On being asked whether he would personally guarantee or find a good Muslim, who would stand guarantee together with a good Hindu for the security of the evacuees who might return to his village, he said he could give no such guarantee. How could he, single-handed, prevent such occurrences?

Gandhiji's suggestion did not seem to find favour with the officials either. They could not imagine how two individuals could provide an effective guarantee of safety to the whole village. Gandhiji explained to them that it would be enough for his purpose if the persons standing guarantee pledged themselves to die rather than allow themselves to be living or passive witnesses to the breach of their guarantee: "You find me the needed Muslims; I shall produce the Hindus."

Abdullah, the Superintendent of Police, said that so long as he was there, he would not allow such things to happen again in Noakhali. Gandhiji thereupon remarked that if he gave that much assurance, he would take it that his own (Gandhiji's) business was over. Only the Superintendent should remember that if after that assurance the old story repeated itself, he would commit harakiri before the Police Superintendent's door! Everybody laughed. But it made one of the members of Gandhiji's party to prick up his ears. He went up to Sucheta Kripalani and whispered to her that the Superintendent of Police was involving Gandhiji in a very serious commitment. Supposing he failed to maintain the peace of Noakhali, Gandhiji might launch on a fast unto death. "They do not seem to realise what they are going in for. They do not know Bapu." Sucheta took up the cue and explained to the company the full implication of what Gandhiji had said. Gandhiji smiled. The faces of the officials lengthened, Abdullah's being the longest of all. Abdullah explained that all he had guaranteed was that he would not allow any disturbances to occur in his area under his nose; if a disturbance should break out in his presence, he would lay down his life in the attempt to put it down.

The officials tried to make out that there was security everywhere; no fresh incidents were taking place, nor was the havoc so serious as was being made out by the newspapers. One of the company pointed out that only the other day two volunteers while returning home from Gandhiji's prayer meeting had been found missing. Could the Superintendent of Police and the other officials trace those boys? They were silent. The dead body of one of the boys was found three days later floating in a *khal*.



There were complaints against the police, too. It was alleged that the police showed less enthusiasm in rounding up the hooligans, with whom they were often seen to fraternise, than in prosecuting the victims of cross-cases that were being brought up by the local Muslims against the Hindus. Several Hindus had been charged with setting fire to mosques and Muslim houses which, in the prevailing circumstances, was on the face of it, absurd.

Some people laid open charges against the Superintendent of Police in connection with his conduct before and during the disturbances but he only cavalierly smiled at the charges; his withers were unwrung.

The question of rounding up the criminals was next taken up. The Superintendent of Police expatiated on the inadequacy of the task-force at his disposal which handicapped him, and so on. "What about taking the assistance of the military?" That was a different story. During the motor drive from Chaumuhani, a Punjabi Muslim army officer, Captain Nyazi by name, who was with me in the same jeep, was describing to me the difficulties of the military. He had been in the Burma campaign and by his daring and resourcefulness had earned for himself the reputation of being a veritable Scarlet Pimpernel. I asked him if it was a fact that only a few days ago a much-wanted man, the organiser and director of the Gopairbag massacre, who was supposed to be absconding, was seen having tea and smoking cigarettes with some officers in the Dattapara military camp. His reply was, "How are we to know the who's who of everybody who comes to us?" I was taken aback. It was for the first time, I remarked, that I had heard that any person could walk into a military camp, smoke, chit-chat, have tea with the officers and depart without the camp authorities being any the wiser for it. He kept silent. I continued: "You, who thought nothing of campaigning in the Burma jungles, do you mean to tell me that the terrain here is more difficult?" He answered, "Yes." "And you want me to believe that after subduing the Japanese guerrillas you are being reduced to impotence by these locals here!" He exploded: "There it was soldiering. Here it is dirty politics. It is disgusting. To get a coconut tree felled to clear the road for my jeep, I have to negotiate half a dozen hurdles." And he broke out into an oath against the civil authority. The military were not given a free hand. The civil authority, instead of collaborating with them, interposed obstacles and sabotaged their effort.

I was narrating this story to Gandhiji when one of the company got up and complained that whenever a search party went out to effect arrests, the wanted men got wind of it beforehand and managed to give them the slip. Sucheta described how she had found that sometimes the police accompanying the military gave a warning by whistling or other pre-arranged signals which showed some kind of collusion with the criminal elements.

The Superintendent of Police interpolated that within a two miles



radius of the police and military stations, the villages were "safe". Gandhiji suggested that those "safe" places might be named and a beginning in rehabilitation made within them in a small way. The District Magistrate felt uneasy: "If we name some places as 'safe' others become 'unsafe'." "But today all are unsafe," Gandhiji replied. In the end the District Magistrate suggested that the refugees should go back to their villages as "an act of faith". But the villagers demurred. The perpetrators of crime were still at large in the villages. How could they go back and again live in their midst unless they were sure that their lives would be safe? The Magistrate promised that the military and the police would be on patrol everywhere and would provide the necessary protection. He further promised that they would be given rations and the Government would arrange to rebuild their houses as soon as possible, if they returned to their villages. Gandhiji interrupted saying, "as soon as possible" formula would not do; the Government should lay down a time schedule and there should be a deadline for the rebuilding of devastated homes. He suggested that the Government should provide the building materials and the local Muslims should provide free, voluntary labour as an earnest of their good faith.

The conference then broke up and the talk became general. In the course of it the District Magistrate incidentally mentioned that a certain Muslim member of the Legislative Assembly was raising a private army under the garb of "Red Cross volunteers" and he (the Magistrate) had to trim it down to proper proportions. Many of these "Red Cross volunteers" were as a matter of fact accused of murder and arson and later it was reported that they were holding up traffic, molesting Hindu families, searching boats passing through canals, and so on.

In the meantime a side discussion had started in a corner of the room about Gandhiji's next day's tour programme. One of the Parliamentary Secretaries asked the other in an aside if he would be accompanying Gandhiji into the interior the next day. "I think we should," he added. "You may, I won't," replied the other. "We have to face the electorate." And he thrust into his colleague's hands a clipping from a Muslim League paper taking the Bengal Ministers to task for "dancing attendance on Mr. Gandhi" and calling upon the Central Muslim League organisation to pull them up. Thereupon they both went up to the District Magistrate and told him that they would be unable to go with Gandhiji the next day owing to "indisposition". "I hope it is not diplomatic illness!" remarked the District Magistrate to me in an aside with a wink!

"See what is taking place!" exclaimed Gandhiji sadly as a Bengali leaflet was put into his hands, purported to be issued by a supposed convert to Islam, saying that they had been "willingly converted" and that Islam was a beautiful religion!

Addressing a gathering of over 10,000 Hindus and Muslims in the



evening at Dattapara, Gandhiji observed that it was a shame for both the Hindus and the Muslims that the Hindus should have to run away from their homes as they had done. He knew the Hindus had suffered a lot and were suffering still. But it served no useful purpose to keep on recalling the past. They should forgive and forget and, if the necessary guarantee was forthcoming, return to their homes with courage in their hearts.

A Muslim friend from the audience said, they had already given the assurance that they would look after the Hindus but the Hindus would not trust them. Gandhiji replied that they should try to understand and appreciate the reason of the Hindus' distrust and overcome their fear. A Hindu refugee got up and asked how they could have confidence in the assurances of the Muslims any more. When the trouble was threatening they had promised to look after them but had failed to protect them afterwards. And if fifty good Muslims in the village had failed to save them on the previous occasion, how could one good Muslim do it now? Besides there were no homes to which they could return; they had lost their all. Were they to go back and live in the jungles? Gandhiji remarked that the Government had promised that their huts would be rebuilt and they would have food and clothing when they returned to their homes. Whatever might have happened in the past, if now one good Muslim and one good Hindu took the responsibility for their safety in each village, they could rely on their word, backed as it would be by the collective invitation and assurance of goodwill of all the Muslims in the village. If they were still afraid they were cowards and even God could not help the cowardly.

## 3

The next day, the 10th November, Gandhiji shifted his camp from Chaumuhani to Dattapara, in order to be able to visit more affected villages in the interior. At the evening prayer gathering at which nearly eighty per cent. were Muslims, Gandhiji spoke of the purifying alchemy of God's name which was more potent than the proverbial philosopher's stone. "The proverbial philosopher's stone is said to turn iron into gold. . . . But the touch of God purifies the soul. . . . That philosopher's stone is within us all." He asked the Muslims to search their hearts and tell him whether they really wanted the Hindus to come back and live in their midst as friends and neighbours. "Whether you believe me or not, I want to assure you that I am a servant of both the Hindus and the Muslims. I have not come here to fight Pakistan. If India is destined to be partitioned, I cannot prevent it. But I wish to tell you that Pakistan cannot be established by force. . . . I ask my Muslim brethren to search their hearts and if they do not wish to live as friends with the Hindus, say so



openly. The Hindus must in that case leave East Bengal and go somewhere else. The refugees cannot stay on as refugees for ever. The Government cannot go on feeding them for an indefinite period. Nor can they subsist for long, as they are subsisting at present, on less than half the daily ration of cereals to keep an able-bodied man alive; no fish, no vegetables, nor anything else to supplement it with. But even if every Hindu of East Bengal goes away, I shall still continue to live amidst the Muslims of East Bengal. I will not import any food from outside but subsist on what they give me and what I consider lawful for me to partake. If, on the other hand, you want the Hindus to stay in your midst, you should tell them that they need not look to the military for protection but to their Muslim brethren instead. Their daughters and sisters and mothers are your daughters, sisters and mothers, and you should protect them with your lives. You should ponder what I have said and let me know what you really wish. I shall advise the Hindus accordingly."

He was physically exhausted as a result of more than a week's semi-fast—the daily nourishment being less than 600 calories. To conserve strength, he had to consent to being carried to the prayer ground in an improvised chair slung over a pole and borne on the shoulders of some members of his party. The voice was feeble and the face bore marks of deep anguish. But there was not a trace of anger or impatience in the speech. It breathed only forgiveness and love. He told the bluntest truth, kept back nothing, suppressed nothing, glozed over nothing. Yet it did not hurt. The hearers felt as if it was their better self speaking to them. The anguished voice of love they heard excluded nobody, felt and suffered equally for all. It was an impassioned appeal to their conscience. What came from the heart went straight to the heart.

On the 11th November, Gandhiji visited the villages of Noakhola, Sonachak and Khilpara, all of them within the Ramgunj police station. The journey was partly by motor and partly by boat. It was with difficulty that the boats could be poled through the *khals* choked with densely matted masses of water hyacinth. At Noakhola, eight members of a Hindu household were said to have been murdered, including a boy of fifteen. The houses had almost all been burnt down. The betel-nut and the coconut trees surrounding the houses were scorched. In one of the houses, where the boy had been murdered, his books and freshly written exercise books were strewn over the floor. All those that were not killed or did not run away were said to have been converted, including a deaf-mute who by piteous signs showed, tied up in a rag, the tuft of hair (conventional symbol of Hinduism) which had been forcibly removed from his head and to which he still clung. The few women that remained were all weeping and wailing. It was a heart-rending scene.

As Gandhiji emerged from the ruined building after his grim tour of inspection, a Tibetan spaniel that was always seen roaming about the place in mournful silence came along and with a soft whimper tried to



attract his attention. It would run a few steps, turn back and again beckon, if it was not followed. Gandhiji's companions were mystified by the strange behaviour of the animal and wanted to drive it away. Gandhiji stopped them, and said: "Don't you see the animal wants to say something to us?" He let the dog lead him. It brought him to three human skeletons one after another and several skulls and bones that lay scattered all over the ground! It had seen its master and seven other members of the family being done to death during the riots. Ever since it had hovered about the place and tried to bring to light the dark deed to which it had been witness. Everybody was amazed at the wonderful intelligence of the animal and its mute loyalty to its dead master.

At Sonachak, Gandhiji visited a *badi* containing more than one hundred structures. It had been looted and burnt. The family temple had been desecrated and destroyed. Gandhiji stopped dead and stood in reverential silence for a few minutes as he came upon broken images lying scattered on the footpaths and among the ruins of the temple. The same weeping and wailing of women met him here, too.

Next day, at the evening prayer gathering, which consisted mostly of refugees, Gandhiji again referred to the question of their repatriation. Up rose a Maulvi Saheb and bombastically said that the Muslims felt "unhappy and even frightened" at the prospect of their Hindu brethren leaving them and going out of East Bengal *en masse*. He was sure that if the evacuees would only come back, the Muslims "in their thousands" would be ready to welcome them back in their midst. Gandhiji snubbed him for the touch of hyperbole in his speech. What was needed in the crisis that faced them was cent per cent. sincerity. As regards the evacuees returning to their homes, as suggested by the Maulvi Saheb, it was not so easy for them as the Maulvi Saheb thought it to be. He had seen the terror-stricken faces of the sufferers. They had been forcibly converted once and they were afraid it might happen again. No scheme for repatriation could work unless the Muslim League fully cooperated.

The discussion was resumed on the 13th November, at Dattapara, in a conference with the Parliamentary Secretaries, the District Magistrate, the Superintendent of Police and some officials. There were besides a number of representatives of relief organisations, the refugees and the local Muslims. It was represented by the Maulvi Saheb who had spoken on the previous day in the prayer meeting that the Muslims, far from wanting to drive away the Hindus, themselves felt insecure as a number of them with status and standing had been put under arrest although they were innocent and that was the real obstacle in the way of their befriending the Hindus. Gandhiji replied that he did not see how that could stand in the way of their establishing good relations with the Hindus. On the contrary, it ought to provide an incentive for cultivating their friendship and winning their confidence so that there would be no motive left to get innocent Muslims implicated. The issue was really



irrelevant to the proposition before them. "When large numbers have participated in crime, it is but natural that some innocent men will be implicated with the guilty ones. It is so all the world over. That does not mean that the guilty ones should not be proceeded against." The remedy was for the Muslims to confer with the Hindus and produce agreed lists of those who had been really guilty. No innocent person would then suffer. To bring to book the really guilty ones was the acid test of the sincerity of the authorities and the local Muslims alike.

Addressing the members of the Muslim League in the gathering, Gandhiji proceeded: "I have come here to seek your cooperation. You are a powerful party. What has happened here does not show Islam at its best or even at its worst. It is the very negation of Islam. The first question we have got to settle is whether there *can* be cooperation between the Hindus and Muslims. I have apprised Shaheed Suhrawardy of the things that have prevented the refugees from returning to their villages. The havoc which I saw yesterday was appalling. These things cannot be whitewashed. Energetic steps have to be taken."

Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Minister, had left for Calcutta to confer with the Chief Minister and his colleagues; no further progress could be made till the Bengal Government's mind was known. The issue was one of vital importance. If the Hindus could live side by side with the Muslims in Noakhali, the two communities could co-exist in the rest of India, too, without vivisection of the Motherland. On the answer to the challenge of Noakhali thus hung the fate of India.

#### 4

Visits to two more villages—Gomatoli and Nandigram—completed the opening phase of Gandhiji's mission in Noakhali. The same scene of devastation that was seen in Noakhola and Khilpara confronted him here, too. Nandigram was a heap of cinders; nearly 600 houses, a school building, a hostel and a hospital having been reduced to ashes.

On the 14th November, Gandhiji shifted his camp from Dattapara to Kazirkhil—right in the heart of devastation. On the way he stopped at Shahpur, the starting point of the disturbances. A public meeting had been arranged here and large attendance was expected. But very few people were to be seen when Gandhiji arrived there. Afterwards it was learnt that the men of the Fuehrer, whose stronghold it was, had spread a rumour that Gandhiji would be accompanied by the Superintendent of Police and an armed guard, and the occasion would be utilised for making arrests. This had scared away the Muslims.

At Kazirkhil, Gandhiji's camp was set up in the partially devastated house of a prosperous Hindu of the locality. No-one was staying here at that time. An advance party of volunteers had cleaned it up and made



it habitable. In the course of his post-prayer addresses on the 14th, 15th and 16th November, Gandhiji observed that he found indescribable peace in the natural scenery around him but he found that peace missing on the faces of men and women. There were no tears in his eyes, he said. He who shed tears could not wipe those of others. But his heart did weep. He had carried on a grim struggle against the Government for 20 years in South Africa and for the last 30 years in India. But the fratricide that they were having was more awful than anything else within his experience. It had nonplussed him. But he had resolved not to leave Bengal empty-handed. The word "pessimism" was not to be found in his dictionary. The Muslims had butchered the Hindus and did worse things than butchery in Bengal, and the Hindus had butchered the Muslims in Bihar. When both parties acted wickedly it was no use making comparisons or saying which one was less wicked than the other, or who started the trouble. If they wished to take revenge, they should learn the art from him. He, too, took revenge, but it was of a different type. He had read a Gujarati poem in his childhood which said : "If to him, who gives you a glass of water, you give two there is no merit in it. Real merit lies in doing good to him who does you evil." That was his conception of noble revenge.

Four miles to the south-east of Kazirkhil was the village Dasgharia. Amtus Salam, a devout Muslim woman inmate of Gandhiji's Ashram had preceded Gandhiji there. Practically all the Hindu women in the village, who had been converted to Islam during the disturbances, had returned to their original faith. On the occasion of Gandhiji's visit, they all came out in a body and greeted him by mass singing of Ramadhun to the accompaniment of *tal*. Thanks to Gandhiji's peace mission, before long there was not one forcibly converted person left throughout Noakhali who had not reverted to his or her original faith.

Of late Gandhiji had noticed that although in the beginning the Muslims were more conspicuous at his prayer meetings even than the Hindus, they were now avoiding him and his meetings. In reply to an appeal by him at a meeting with the Muslims of Dasgharia, some Muslims said that before they could accept his advice to befriend the Hindus they would need orders from the Muslim League leaders. At that Gandhiji pulled out the previous day's newspaper that happened to be with him and read out of it a statement in which Jinnah had said that if the Muslims lost their balance and gave vent to the spirit of vengeance and retaliation, they would not only lose their title to Pakistan; it would start a vicious circle of bloodshed and cruelty which would at once put off the day of their freedom and prolong the period of slavery and bondage. "We must prove politically," the statement concluded, "that we are brave, generous and trustworthy. . . and that in the Pakistan areas the minorities will enjoy the fullest security of life, property and honour just as the Muslims themselves, nay even greater." If on examination, Gandhiji



remarked, they found that the quotation which he had read out was correct, they should search their hearts and ask themselves if they had lived up to that message and what it demanded of them.

On the 16th November, Abdul Gofran, the Minister for Civil Supplies, who had come from Calcutta, addressed Gandhiji's prayer meeting. He himself was from Noakhali, where he had served as Public Prosecutor before he became a Minister. In the course of his speech he assured the Hindus of East Bengal that neither the Government of Bengal nor the Muslim League wanted the Hindus to go away from East Bengal, just as the Congress did not wish the Muslims in the Congress Provinces to leave their homes and go somewhere else. The League wanted to prove that it knew how to run the Government justly. They should let bygones be bygones and turn over a new leaf. When one had suffered as they had, one was liable to become filled with suspicion. But that had to be overcome. To contradict the mischievous rumours that had been circulated at Shahpur, he announced to the audience that, as desired by Gandhiji, instructions had been issued not to arrest anyone while coming to attend Gandhiji's meetings, at the meetings or while returning home from those meetings. Gandhiji's prayer gatherings thus became a sanctuary and a true meeting place of hearts.

The meeting was still in progress when a member from the audience stood up. He wanted to be given five minutes to reply to Gofran's speech. Gandhiji disallowed the request saying he did not want the meeting to be turned into a public debate. It was open to the friend in question to say what he had to say in a letter, and if it was not couched offensively, he would gladly forward it to Gofran.

The next day at the evening prayer gathering, Gandhiji was surprised to find that no women came and very few Hindus. On inquiry, he was told that the Hindus were annoyed because on the previous evening he had not allowed a member from the audience to reply to Abdul Gofran's remarks in the meeting. Later, however, the local Hindu leaders explained that they had not boycotted the meeting but it being Sunday, the bazar day, the women were afraid to come out as there would be many Muslims from the neighbouring villages, including goondas, about. The explanation did not sound convincing. Gandhiji told them that he would not have minded their boycotting his meeting as a protest. But if the abstention was due to fear, as stated, it was cowardice. One could understand women being afraid but were men also such cowards?

In a written message that was read out at the prayer gathering on the 18th November, Gandhiji described the anatomy of fear. "The more I go about in these parts, the more I find that your worst enemy is fear. The terrorist as well as the terrorised are equally its victims. It eats into their vitals. The former fears something in his victim, it may be the latter's religion, which is different from his own, or the latter's riches. The second kind of fear is otherwise known as greed or love of material



possessions. If you search deeply enough, you will find that greed is a variety of fear. But there has never been and never will be a man who can intimidate one who has cast out fear from his heart because God is always by the side of the fearless. If we make God our sole refuge, all our fears will vanish. Unless you cultivate fearlessness, there will never be any peace in these parts for the Hindus or for the Muslims.”

At the request of the women from the village of Madhupur, Gandhiji held a women’s meeting at Madhupur the next day. He was told that there were some women in the villages who wanted to come away but wanted military escort. Gandhiji told them, he never could be a party to such a request. Hindus and Muslims should be free to break each other’s heads if they wanted to. It was up to the men workers to tell the women that they would be their escort and would protect them with their lives. If still the women were afraid to come, there was no help for them. Those who preferred security to freedom had no right to live. He had come to proclaim from the housetops that the women had to become brave or else perish. They should make use of the calamity that had befallen them to cast out the demon of fear.

## 5

While Gandhiji in spite of his semi-fast was thus wearing himself out in a ceaseless endeavour to reach the hearts of the officials, the Muslim Leaguers, the riot victims and the local Muslims alike, a resolution was slowly forming in his mind. His formula of one good Muslim and one good Hindu as a guarantor for each village had not evoked a favourable response from the Muslim Leaguers, though he had not yet given up hope. The criminal elements had been threatening the Hindus that the Mahatma was not going to be in their midst for ever. The Hindus, on the other hand, were perturbed to find that instead of supporting their demand for more police and more military protection, he deprecated both. Suppose the police and the military were tomorrow suddenly withdrawn, they would again be marooned and left to the tender mercies of their erstwhile oppressors. The prospect froze them with horror. The dry season was fast approaching. The *khals* would soon dry up and deprive them of the one means of transport easily available to them. Their only chance of safety lay in making good their escape before the mouse-trap closed upon them once more. An answer had to be found to their fears.

Shaheed Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister, with two of his colleagues, the Parliamentary Secretaries and some local Muslims met Gandhiji on the 19th November. The talks were of a general and exploratory character. They suggested that the extra police and military should be withdrawn from the areas as a measure for the establishment of goodwill between the communities and the refugees should return to their homes. To their agreeable surprise, in regard to both these propositions, they found



in Gandhiji a willing and ready convert. His non-violence demanded it. But when in his turn Gandhiji asked them whether they would get one honest Muslim to stand surety for the safety of the returning refugees in each village, one of the Ministers replied that not one but all the Muslims were there collectively as surety. Gandhiji said, that was fine; the more the merrier. But what was everybody's responsibility was really nobody's responsibility. He had asked for only one Muslim and one Hindu for each village. He would find the Hindu. Would the Muslim Leaguers, who formed the Bengal Government, find the Muslim? The reply to this was a stony silence. Without knowing it, he had dropped a brick. The fact was that the Muslim League had never appreciated his coming to Noakhali or the motive behind the prolongation of his stay there, and the word had already been sent round not to cooperate in his mission. The Bengal Ministry had incurred unpopularity among a section of the Muslims for allowing Gandhiji and "outside agencies" to work in Noakhali and for drafting extra police and the military into the disturbed areas, and the rival faction in the League organisation in Bengal had not been slow to take advantage of it. The Chief Minister and his colleagues found themselves in a tight fix. They could not think or act coherently. They wobbled. Their concrete proposals did not come up before Gandhiji till later.

In the meantime Gandhiji could not sit still. He had to act. As early as 12th November, he had come to the decision that he would break up his camp, deprive himself of the services of all his companions and bury himself in East Bengal until such time as the Hindus and Muslims learnt to live together in harmony and peace. He would fend for himself with whatever local assistance he was able to command. All the members of his party, including the women, would be detailed to settle down, each in one affected village chosen for them, and make themselves hostages for the safety and security of the Hindus in that village. His decision was not binding on anyone of his party, he said. Those who wanted could go away and take up other constructive activity. "Those who have ill will against the Muslims or disrespect for Islam in their hearts or cannot curb their indignation at what has happened should stay away. They will only misrepresent me by working under this plan." So far as he was concerned, he announced, his decision was final and irrevocable.

A discussion with the members of his party followed. His Ahimsa would be incomplete, Gandhiji explained, unless he took that step. "Either Ahimsa is the law of life or it is not." He recalled how a friend used to twit him by saying that the *Ahimsa Sutra* in Patanjali, *Ahimsa pratishthayam tatsannidhau vairatyagah* (all enmity vanishes in the presence of perfect Ahimsa) was a mistake and needed to be amended; and the saying *Ahimsa paramodharmah* (non-violence is the highest religion) ought to read *Ahimsa paramo-adharmah* (non-violence is the height of irreligion). In other words, violence, not non-violence, was the law of life. If at the



crucial moment he lost faith in non-violence, he must accept the amendment. His whole soul rebelled against it. "I know the women of Bengal better than probably the Bengalis do. Today they feel crushed and helpless. The sacrifice of myself and my companions would at least teach them the art of dying with self-respect. It might open the eyes of the oppressors, too, and melt their hearts. I do not say that the moment my eyes are closed theirs will open. But that it will be the ultimate result I have not the shadow of a doubt. If Ahimsa disappears, Hindu religion disappears."

"The issue is not religious but political. It is not a movement against the Hindus but against the Congress," remarked a member of the party.

"Don't you see they think that the Congress is purely a Hindu body? And do not forget that I have no watertight divisions such as religious, political and others. Let us not lose ourselves in the forest of words. Is the tangle to be solved violently, or non-violently—that is the question. In other words, has my method any validity today?"

"How can you reason with people who are thirsting for your blood? Only the other day two of our workers were murdered," interposed another of the company.

"I know it. But to quell the rage is our job."

In a letter to a friend he wrote: "The work I am engaged in here may be my last act. If I return from here alive and unscathed, it will be like a new birth to me. My Ahimsa is being tried here through and through as it was never before."<sup>1</sup>

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On the road of Satyagraha there is no halting place, no rest. One must always move forward or else fall back. Two days later Gandhiji took another important step forward. He would live in a Muslim household if a Muslim Leaguer approved of by the Bengal Ministry would be prepared to receive him as a member of the family. He discussed the question with Abdul Gofran, the Minister, and asked him if he could recommend any. The Minister was taken aback by the proposal. How could Gandhiji live by himself under the conditions of life in Noakhali in the midst of utter strangers, who would not know in the least how to look after him? "I will look after myself; I shall need nobody's attention," replied Gandhiji. "Then, I am afraid, I must say that no Muslim family is prepared to receive you!" replied the Minister laughing.

But Gandhiji's decision was made. He was in the midst of a Muslim population in Noakhali. He would not, therefore, like, he said, to stay in a Hindu family. If the Hindus saw him living alone with a Muslim League friend, it would put heart into them and probably induce them to return to their homes with confidence. The Muslims, too, would be able to examine his life closely. "I have no privacy; they will see everything and find out for themselves whether I am their enemy or friend."



He did not, however, want to postpone his venture in faith till a Muslim household was ready to receive him. "When I was in detention in the Aga Khan Palace," he remarked, "I once sat down to write a thesis on India as a protagonist of non-violence. But as I proceeded with my writing, I could not go on. I had to stop. There are two aspects of Hinduism. There is, on the one hand, the historical Hinduism with its untouchability, superstitious worship of stocks and stones, animal sacrifice and so on. On the other, we have the Hinduism of the Gita, the Upanishads and Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, which is the acme of Ahimsa and oneness of all creation, pure worship of one immanent, formless, imperishable God. Ahimsa, which for me is the chief glory of Hinduism, has been sought to be explained away by our people as being meant for the *sannyasi* only. I do not think so. I hold that it is *the* way of life and India has to show it to the world. Where do I stand? Do I represent this Ahimsa in my person? If I do, then deceit and hatred that poison the atmosphere here should dissolve. It is only by going into isolation from my companions, those on whose help I have relied all along, and standing on my own crutches that I shall find my bearings and also test my faith in God."<sup>2</sup>

To the inmates of Sevagram Ashram, he wrote: "I am afraid, you must give up all hope of my early return or my returning at all to the Ashram. The same applies to my companions. It is a Herculean task that faces me. I am being tested. Is the Satyagraha of my conception a weapon of the weak or really that of the strong? I must either realise the latter or lay down my life in the attempt. That is my quest."<sup>3</sup>

On the 20th November Gandhiji broke up his camp and accompanied only by his stenographer and Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose, his Bengali interpreter, set out Columbus-like to face the dark unknown. Before he embarked, the little group round him held a short prayer. His favourite hymn *Vaishnavajana* was sung. Many voices were husky, many eyes dim with tears as the tiny bamboo country-craft bearing him passed under the arches of the Ramgunj bridge and disappeared in the distance in the direction of Srirampur. In a statement he said:

I find myself in the midst of exaggeration and falsity. I am unable to discover the truth. There is a terrible mutual distrust. Oldest friendships have snapped. Truth and Ahimsa by which I swear, and which have to my knowledge sustained me for sixty years, seem to fail to show the attributes I have ascribed to them. To test them, or better to test myself, I am going to a village called Srirampur, cutting myself away from those who have been with me all these years, and who have made life easy for me.... The other workers, whom I have brought with me, will each distribute themselves in other villages of Noakhali to do the work of peace, if it is at all possible, between the two communities....

My ideal is to live in a local Muslim League family, but... I must



meanwhile establish such contacts with the Muslims as I can in their own villages. My suggestion to the League Ministers is that they should give me one honest and brave Muslim to accompany one equally honest and brave Hindu for each affected village.... Without some such thing it seems to me difficult to induce ... (the Hindu refugees) to return to their villages. From all accounts ... life is not as yet smooth and safe for the minority community in the villages. They, therefore, prefer to live as exiles from their own homes, crops, plantations and surroundings, and live on inadequate and ill-balanced doles.

Many friends from outside Bengal have written to me to allow them to come for peace work but I have strongly dissuaded them from coming. I would love to let them come if and when I see light through this impenetrable darkness. In the meantime ... I have decided to suspend all other activities in the shape of correspondence, including the heavy work of *Harijan* and the allied weeklies....

How long this suspense will last is more than I can say. This much, however, I can. I do not propose to leave East Bengal till I am satisfied that mutual trust has been established between the two communities and the two have resumed the even tenor of their lives in their villages. Without this there is neither Pakistan nor Hindustan; only slavery awaits India, torn asunder by mutual strife and engrossed in barbarity.

There was however one consolation. On receiving a wire from Dr. Rajendra Prasad earnestly requesting him to give up his semi-fast in view of the rapid improvement that had taken place in the Bihar situation Gandhiji announced that he had decided to revert to normal diet as soon as his system might permit. The decision came not a moment too soon. To a friend Gandhiji wrote: "I have just been rescued from the very jaws of death."

A few days later in a letter he wrote: "My present mission is the most complicated and difficult one of my life. I can sing (with Cardinal Newman) with cent per cent. truth: 'The night is dark and I am far from home, Lead Thou me on.' I never experienced such darkness in my life before. The night seems long. The only consolation is that I feel neither baffled nor disappointed. I am prepared for any eventuality. 'Do or Die' has to be put to test here. 'Do' here means Hindus and Muslims should learn to live together in peace and amity. Otherwise, I should die in the attempt. It is really a difficult task. God's will be done."<sup>4</sup>



### CHAPTER III

## THE LONE SOJOURN

### 1

AFTER TWO and a half hours' journey, the slow-moving country-craft bearing the Mahatma, now separated from almost all his companions, reached Srirampur, a tiny speck of a village, two miles to the north-west of Ramgunj police station, and lightly he stepped out of the boat with the spring and agility of a youth to take up his solitary abode in the hut that had been got ready to receive him. Immediately on entering it he spread out with his own hands his mattress on a wooden bed-stead, which was to serve as his office by day and bed at night for the rest of his six weeks' stay there, and arranged his books and papers at one end of it in his usual neat, methodical order. And so the new life began.

Gandhiji's new residence at Srirampur was a small tin-covered cottage, situated in a sunny clearing, in the midst of pool-dotted paddy fields and tall betel-nut and coconut groves. The bazar and the post office were far away. All around was spread out the grim vista of destruction and desolation. Of the original 582 families in the village, three hundred and eighty-two families had been Muslims and two hundred Hindus. But of the latter, now only three remained. The rest had all fled away in terror. The charred woodwork in the interior of the hut, just above Gandhiji's seat, bore witness to the hand of arson.

Gandhiji would have liked to live there all alone but that was hardly possible. For years he had been in the habit of taking a daily tepid immersion bath and relaxation massage as part of his treatment for high blood pressure. These were the first to be sacrificed. Instead, he rubbed a little oil over his body himself and bathed with a mug from a bucket of warm water. "It was fatiguing," he afterwards recorded in his diary, "but felt fine." Cooking of meals etc., was reduced to the barest essentials. Half a pound of goat's milk diluted with an equal volume of clear vegetable soup made up the mid-day meal. The same menu was served at evening with grape-fruit in addition.

The change, in spite of Gandhiji's stoicism, was not effected without a wrench. His granddaughter-in-law, Abha Gandhi, had accompanied him to Noakhali. She had become an ideal nurse for him. He sent away her, too, to work in a village sixteen miles away under Thakkar Bapa in Char Mandal area of Noakhali district. "I must own that I was getting accustomed to her service almost as a matter of habit," he



wrote afterwards in a letter. "But the habit of taking service from a particular individual is inconsistent with austerity."<sup>1</sup>

The news of Gandhiji's departure had travelled long before him from village to village and an endless concourse of men and women had begun to trek in the direction of Srirampur from early morning. There was a continuous round of visitors the whole day. "I have come here to enter into the mind of every one of the inhabitants here," Gandhiji said to one of the first persons who met him on his arrival at Srirampur. He was a Muslim *chowkidar* from a neighbouring *badi*. He told Gandhiji that they all deplored the evil things that had happened, but what could they do? It was all the will of Allah! Gandhiji replied that he, too, believed in the omnipotence of God's will but individuals also had their duty to perform. He had come there to perform his.

A Maulvi Saheb came a little later and invited him to visit his home the next day. Gandhiji accepted the invitation. A social worker came next and asked if they could now tell the refugees in Ramgunj refugee camp to return to Srirampur. Gandhiji told him, they should wait. In a few days he would be able to know the mind of the local Muslims and would then be able to give proper advice.

The evening congregational prayer was attended by about a thousand persons. In the course of his prayer address Gandhiji observed that he had advised the Hindus to depend on personal courage. But till now he himself had lived surrounded by a number of companions. Of late, however, he had begun to say to himself: "Now is the time. If you want to know yourself, go forth alone." And so he had come practically alone to stay in their village with unquenchable faith in God, to strive and persevere till all opposition was disarmed and confidence came back to those who had lost all hope.

While having his evening walk after the prayer, he was bitten by some insect. The day's diary concludes: "Excruciating pain. Weight 106½ lbs."

The next day it was raining. So Gandhiji could not visit the Maulvi Saheb's house. But he sent Prof. Bose to convey his apologies. Five Hindu boys came next. Their father, uncle and brothers had been murdered during the disturbances and they themselves were converted to Islam. Gandhiji questioned them in detail as to the happenings and asked them to put it all down in black and white. Hereafter his world was to consist of the poor, humble folk, most of them homeless destitutes—*malis*, *chowkidars* and barbers, blacksmiths, weavers, carpenters and fishermen etc. The world of high politics, diplomats and statesmen he had for the time being left behind. Before this he had used politics to serve the common folk. He now set out to mould the politics of the country by the service of the common folk. It was a unique experiment in mass psychological engineering. He had done that before in different ways with astonishing results.

A glimpse of Gandhiji's day to day life during his sojourn at



Srirampur is afforded by the detailed diary which he kept with unfailing regularity. Here are a few typical entries:

*Srirampur, 21st November, 1946*

Conducted the morning prayer myself with the exception of the Gita chapters. After prayer wrote letters to X. Y. and Z. A Maulvi attached to the Howrah mosque (Noakhali) had a talk with me during the morning walk. A. and B. (two Hindu workers) came afterwards and had a long talk. Told them that people ought to take their courage in both hands and return to their villages, especially where there is a good Hindu with a good Muslim to give guarantee of safety and protection....

Massaged the body with my own hands but had to forgo a shave (for lack of time). Had curdled milk with vegetable soup for mid-day meal. Some Muslims... saw me before the evening prayer; some more followed after the prayer. Made inquiries about local Muslims.... Had a two hours' talk with M. and his friends. Diet the same as yesterday but without grape-fruit.

*Srirampur, 22nd November, 1946*

Rose at 4 a.m. The Gita recitation took 2 hours. Pronunciation of the reciter was very unsatisfactory.

Wrote to R. that his son (who recently lost his wife) should not remarry, or marry a widow if he must.

Visited a Muslim *badi* at 7.30 a.m. The way was long. It took full 20 minutes to get there—55 minutes coming and going.

Gave myself massage like yesterday.... At 10.30 a number of visitors came. After they had gone, had a short nap with mud-pack on the abdomen. Spun for one hour. Abdullah (the Superintendent of Police) with some others came for the meeting at Ramgunj in the evening. Started at 4 p.m. with them for Ramgunj. Reached Ramgunj at 5.20 p.m. The meeting continued till 10.30 p.m. Addressed a few words at the end.... Had evening prayer on the boat on the return journey and then some sleep. Had milk while proceeding to Ramgunj; hot water on return. Reached Srirampur at midnight.

*Srirampur, 23rd November, 1946*

Recited the Gita chapters (during morning prayer) also myself. In future P. is to recite the Gita only when he has sufficiently mastered the pronunciation. Had an English hymn sung at the prayer.

Completed the statement on the death of Malviyaji. Visited a Muslim house at 7.30 a.m. Talked about the Koran to the inmates. Later they sent a present of coconuts and oranges.

Massage was given by N. so that I was able to have a 40 minutes' nap on the massage table. Leafy vegetable served at midday was very bitter. Took it with 1 oz. of coconut milk.... Next unsuccessfully tried to have a doze of sleep—nausea and griping. Gave myself enema.... Dozed off with mud-pack on the abdomen while proceeding to Ramgunj.... Had to stop the boat on account of violent diarrhoea and vomiting.... Felt relieved.... Reached



Ramgunj at 5 p.m. Had another motion during the recess but was able to address the meeting at the end without difficulty. Started on the return journey at 8.15 p.m.... Reached Srirampur at 11 p.m.... Completed the daily quota of spinning, partly on the boat while proceeding to the meeting and the balance at the meeting itself.

Spinning was a daily "must". He recommended it to workers and riot-affected people for overcoming the psychology of fear and rebuilding the shattered social order in the affected area on a new basis.

After a day's grind on the 1st December: "The back ached. Revised an article for *Harijan* lying in bed. Dozed off in the middle." He had cultivated the habit of writing with the left hand in case the right hand was tired or disabled. On the 2nd December, he felt exhausted but continued to work lying on his back. The diary proceeds to record: "Must stop. Even the left hand now aches and has struck work. To bed 9.30 p.m."

The diary of 8th December, 1946, has the following with reference to a slip in the observance of his weekly silence: "I see my discipline of silence is only skin-deep. Silence is a great art, not easy to master."

On the 11th December, he felt very tired after the evening walk. "Exhaustion continues," the diary of the 12th December goes on to record. After the morning walk he felt so utterly exhausted that he had to lie in bed. It must have been about midnight when he got up to visit the chamber-pot. "It seems I was not fully awake. Fancied it was before me when in fact it was not. . . . Woke up with a start. Began to grope for it in the dark. Found it after a few minutes. . . . Wanted to take a dose of castor oil. Called P. thrice. . . . No reply. Tried to go to sleep by reciting Ramanama. Succeeded at last." And then, as if smitten by remorse for having had recourse to a laxative, he goes on to add: "Why cannot I, who preach the all-healing virtue of Ramanama to others, be content to rely on it exclusively myself?"

The working day sometimes extended to sixteen hours of hard work. To top all this he sometimes made incursions into the kitchen to inspect the cooking arrangements of his companions and to instruct them in culinary science in which he claimed to be an expert. He insisted on making his own bed, mended his own clothes and later even packed his travelling kit himself. The kit included practically all his personal requirements. Very often he himself wrote down the reports of his prayer addresses for the Press and when once he found that the statement of accounts sent by the Gandhi Camp headquarters at Kazirkhil was not satisfactory, he started jotting down memoranda of daily accounts also in his diary as a part of his discipline.

In spite of appeals to the public to spare him, the daily mail bag continued to swell. Normally it required about half a dozen well-trained assistants to handle it. Now he had only Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose and



his stenographer. As a part of his self-denying plan, he felt he ought to deprive himself even of their secretarial assistance as far as possible. He tried to impress upon them that they must regard their desk-work as incidental; their real value to him was in the use he could make of them for the service of the riot-victims and the Muslim masses in whose midst they were. So, he took upon himself the disposal of the bulk of his mail, too.

Afternoons were generally the busiest part of the day and were devoted to giving interviews to co-workers, officials, visitors and such local Hindus and Muslims as might come to see him individually or in groups. Even at meal time he could not be by himself. There would be either visitors, or something or other always to do. The morning and evening walks were utilised for paying visits to the destitute, the distressed and the sick, and especially for making the acquaintance of the local Muslims.

During the disturbances almost all the dispensaries in the affected area had been looted and destroyed. The doctors were mostly Hindus. They had fled with the result that no medicines or medical attendance could be had in the affected area for love or money for miles around. It gave him an opportunity to recommend to the village folk nature-cure for their simple ailments. He constituted himself their nature-cure doctor. Before long, he had won their confidence and people began to talk of the healing touch of the man of God. But although he had boundless faith in nature-cure and the curative power of Ramanama so far as he was personally concerned, he never made a dogma of it or forced it on others. And so when two Muslim boys suffering from kala-azar were brought to him, he sent for Dr. Sushila, who had set up a free dispensary in the neighbouring village of Changirgaon for the poor of both the communities to treat them, and made her walk nearly six miles daily to give them the necessary injections.

\* \* \*

On the 20th December, Gandhiji completed one month of his sojourn at Srirampur. Four weeks ago, he had set out practically alone supporting his frail body on his long bamboo staff. "He is (now) friend of both the communities here," ran a Press message. "Muslims and Hindus of the village do not hesitate to come to him to seek his help. He is their friend, philosopher and guide. . . . In his lonely life he tries to do everything himself . . . cooking his own food . . . arranging his own things, massaging his own body and acting as his own doctor."<sup>2</sup>

"Mahatma Gandhi is spending most of his time in attending the poor and the sick," ran another message. "Yesterday morning he again visited a Muslim's house where he saw patients treated by Dr. Sushila Nayar. In the afternoon he visited another Muslim's house to give medical aid. In the evening he paid a visit to the Press camp and attended to a bed-ridden journalist."<sup>3</sup>



"He is now experimenting with his strength. . . (to see) how long he can walk without being very much exhausted," ran still another report. "He walks fast. Last Saturday he walked with excellent speed through the narrow village road, crossing two precarious bridges and covering about 2 miles in 40 minutes. He has also increased his evening and morning walks. . . ."4

Some of the reports were rather disturbing. One of them ran: "Gandhiji is now very heavily overworked and has (consequently) extended his working hours by nearly an hour beginning from four in the morning. He did not address the post-prayer meeting. . . because he was too tired."5

Finally ran a report: "Gandhiji does not like to be surrounded by workers or other people. . . None is allowed to stay in his camp for the night except in cases of emergency. One man travelled all the way from Nagpur but he was immediately sent back after his special job here was finished. One woman who had been on fast came here yesterday and broke her fast before Gandhiji. . . She also was sent back straightaway."6

Once Gandhiji paid a visit to a local Maulvi's *badi*, half a mile away, and learnt from him that in a total population of 1,400 in the village, there was only one matriculate, the number of those who could read and write was only 40; while 1,000 could recite the Koran but without understanding the meaning. And yet in this area, there had been wholesale conversions to Islam, which were claimed by the local Muslims to be "voluntary and natural"! "How deplorable is the condition of both Hindus and Muslims here," he reflected aloud. "It is awful to keep them (Muslims) in darkness as to the meaning of their scripture." Thereafter he never missed an opportunity in his own humble way to educate them in it even by incurring the displeasure of the orthodox Maulanas and Mullas who resented his poaching on their preserve.

On another occasion, he visited a poor Muslim family. They complained that they were hard put to it to make both ends meet. It set him thinking. Why should there be poverty in Bengal? He recalled how he had told Mr. Casey, the former Governor of Bengal, that to call Bengal poor or a deficit Province was to declare one's own bankruptcy of intellect and resourcefulness. He poured out his heart in a personal letter to Shaheed Suhrawardy:

Why should not you make Bengal the best of all the Provinces of India, if not of the world? Nature has been more than lavish in bestowing her choicest gifts on Bengal. Its stately palms and abundant vegetation intoxicate. Nature has been equally kind in giving to Bengal giants in literature and in the scientific and the musical field and . . . you have, as in the Punjab, a balanced population, with a slight advantage over the Hindu population over the whole of Bengal, the Muslim population having a decisive advantage in East Bengal, the most luxuriant part of the Province. . . . I was depressed when, on visiting



the Muslim parts of Srirampur, I discovered that the boys could only parrot-like recite the Koran, without knowing the meaning of what they were reading, and during the very friendly and intimate conversation I had with the Muslims there, I detected no sense of sorrow or shame at things being so bad. Roads there are none, you have to go from place to place on foot. The bamboo bridges, though incredibly cheap and very artistic, require fair agility to cross. . . . Water in the numerous tanks is not drinkable. People lack the sense of sanitation. Therefore, the beautiful-looking tanks contain water so filthy that I would not dare to wash myself in them. And I know that with a little solid education, requiring no knowledge of the alphabet, they could put the tanks in good condition. Mr. Casey engaged me for hours in discussing his very costly scheme of ensuring water supply for Bengal, a scheme which you will probably never be able to put through. But sanitary education and simple engineering skill could give Bengal as much pure water as it would need for her simple wants. I know that Bengal has no reason to be a deficit or poor Province. How I would love to use my God-given gifts for service in attending to these very simple but equally urgent problems of Bengal in which there is no room for conflict of cultures!<sup>7</sup>

With Gandhiji to think was to act. He forthwith set about to make himself a Noakhali man. He began taking lessons in Bengali regularly and no schoolboy preparing for his examination could have worked harder or more assiduously. The lessons became a sacrament, a part of his *yajna*. As an instance of the thoroughness with which he went to work, the following from a contemporary diary will speak for itself:

To practise Bengali character writing, he drew squares on his exercise book like a lower form schoolboy. When I twitted him for it, he replied, "That is how my teacher used to teach us to draw characters of the alphabet. It is an excellent method. People think that one ceases to be a student when his schooldays are over. With me it is the other way about. I hold that so long as I live, I must have a student's inquiring mind and thirst for learning."

After taking fruit juice he began to pore over his Bengali primer. While doing so, he dozed off for about ten minutes, waking up at 7.15 a.m. At 7.25 we started on our day's march, reaching . . . at 8.25 a.m. after full one hour's walk. Immediately on his arrival there, he again sat down to do his Bengali lesson.<sup>8</sup>

No matter how late the hour or how heavy the pressure of work, the Bengali lesson and the writing exercise were never missed. The last exercise was done on the 30th January, 1948, a few hours before the end.

## 2

Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Minister for Labour, with one of his Parliamentary Secretaries and some local Muslim leaders met Gandhiji on



the day of his arrival at Srirampur to discuss with him the Bengal Government's peace plan. It consisted of setting up Government-sponsored Peace Committees of local Hindus and Muslims in the affected areas. Gandhiji was impressed by the Minister's sincerity. But a local leader of the minority community, who was present, objected that unless known bad characters were rounded up first, the Peace Committees would not inspire confidence. Gandhiji advised them that they should not insist upon the arrest of bad characters as a condition precedent. "Let the Peace Committees be formed. The Committees may then be asked to name the undesirable characters who should be arrested."

The discussion was resumed on the following day with a deputation of Hindu leaders of the district. They, in their turn, put forth certain demands (e.g., substitution of Hindu police officials for Muslim, removal of the Muslim Superintendent of Police, who was incharge of the district at the time of the disturbances etc.), which they wanted to be met before the Peace Committees were formed. Insistence on full compliance with their demand, under the circumstances, would have amounted to a summary rejection of the Government's peace offer. Gandhiji said, that would be disastrous. It would accentuate bitterness. They should give the Government a chance to do the right thing. If after a fair trial they found that the plan was unworkable, they could denounce it and resign from the Peace Committees. That would give them added strength.

He was sure, he told them, that if his plan of one Hindu and one Muslim as guarantors for the peace of each village succeeded, everything would be all right. But of that, he admitted, he saw little hope in the immediate future, though as a man of faith he was bound to persevere. "Do you see any change of heart in the present plan?" he was asked. "No," he answered. "But there is a change in the Government's policy." He had come to realise from bitter experience, he added, that they could not expect a change of heart so soon in the existing circumstances in Noakhali. But as a man of experience, his advice to them was that they should accept the Government's plan and try to work it for all it was worth.

He then proceeded to examine their points one by one. In the place of their demand for the substitution of Hindu officers for Muslim, he suggested the non-communal formula of "impartial and unbiassed officers". He deprecated the attack on the Muslim Police Superintendent. If they wanted to blame anybody they should blame the Government or the Chief Minister of Bengal. They were wrong in pressing for communal consideration in the services. "You should ask yourself when making such demands what the Bihar Government, for instance, would say to a similar demand on the part of the Bihar Muslims."

One of the members of the deputation pointed out that the Bihar Government had employed Muslim police to quell the disturbances.



Gandhiji replied that if it was so it showed their weakness. A Government was not worthy of its name if it could not produce officers of unimpeachable integrity who could be depended upon to do their duty impartially, and faithfully carry out the Government's orders.

It was next represented to Gandhiji that most of the leading Hindu families of Noakhali having fled, only a disorganised rabble, consisting mainly of the menial staff of the influential folk, such as *malis*, *chowkidars*, washermen, etc., were left behind. Whom were they to put on the Peace Committees as the representatives of the Hindus? Gandhiji replied that as the leading Hindus had run away leaving the poorer section in the lurch, they had forfeited the right to represent the Hindu community. It was true that if in the Peace Committees the Muslims were represented by intelligent, influential individuals while the Hindus had only ignorant, illiterate people to represent them, the latter might be overwhelmed by the former. But that risk had to be taken if they were to evolve democracy. The remedy was to ask those who had run away to come back and shoulder the responsibility. If they did not, the common man must come forward and take their place. "Nature abhors a vacuum. It is the day of the common man."

A conference of about 30 representatives of both the communities and Government's spokesmen was held in Gandhiji's presence at Ramgunj Dak Bungalow on the evening of the 22nd November, when a plan for the establishment of peace, based on the Bengal Government's proposals, was finally hammered out, and a nucleus of the Peace Committee for Ramgunj police station was formed. The formula adopted was that there should be Peace Committees, with equal numbers of Hindus and Muslims, for the village, the village union, and the police station. The Muslims would be selected by the Hindus and an official would be the chairman. The Government would undertake to implement the recommendations of the Peace Committees. In case of disagreement, there would be a provision for a vertical reference, the District Magistrate being the final arbiter with full powers.

The functions of the Peace Committees were defined to be (a) to do intensive propaganda work to restore confidence, (b) to help in constructing shelters for the returning refugees, and in procuring and distributing relief, e.g., food, clothing etc., (c) to draw up lists of culprits and disturbers of peace, who should be rounded up. These lists would be checked up with the first information reports already lodged with the police and arrests made on verification. If an innocent person was found to have been arrested, the Peace Committee would recommend to the Magistrate his release on bail or unconditionally as the case might be; and (d) to prepare a list of houses destroyed or damaged during the disturbances. This would be compared with the Government's list and a final list drawn up.

The first meeting of the newly-formed Peace Committee was held at



Ramgunj police station on the evening of the 25th November. The proceedings on the whole were characterized by a healthy spirit of mutual give-and-take and reasonable accommodation. When a spokesman of the Hindus suggested that a person whose relatives were implicated in riot cases should not be on the Peace Committees and should resign, a Muslim member made the counter-proposal that, instead of resigning, such a person should refrain from participating in the discussion, when the case of his relative came up. His suggestion was accepted by the other side.

Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Minister, in introducing the Government's peace plan, announced that since they had met last, seven Union Peace Committees had been formed. He declared that the plan which he had put before them represented the Bengal Government's considered policy and gave his word of honour that it would be implemented.

Gandhiji speaking at the end remarked that the success of the scheme would depend upon right persons being put on the committee. It was better to have no committees than to have committees with the wrong type of members. In the case of at least one village, some Muslim members on the Peace Committee were reported to be unreliable persons themselves. The Hindus feared them but had not the courage to state their objection openly. What was needed was not an elaborate machinery, governmental or other, but brave men and true. He still preferred his formula of two brave men, one Hindu and one Muslim, taking charge of each village and pledging themselves to prevent mischief with their lives. He did not like the scramble on the part of some Muslims for getting a place on the Peace Committees. It filled him with forebodings. There were signs that in some parts trouble was still brewing. A wire had just come from Sandwip island reporting grave trouble there. He had met women who put on the auspicious vermilion mark on their forehead privately, but were afraid to be seen with it in public and wiped it off when they stirred out of their homes. This state of things had to be remedied. The onus lay on the Muslims. Their reputation was at stake. Government machinery by itself could achieve but little.

The peace plan was put before the people at a public meeting held a few days later in the village of Chandipur. Gandhiji speaking at the close of the meeting, uttered the following significant words: "Here are elected Muslims who are running the Government of the Province. They have given you their word of honour—they would not be silent witnesses to the repetition of shameful deeds. My advice to the Hindus is to believe in their word and give them a fair trial. This does not mean that there would not be a single bad Muslim left in East Bengal. There are good men and bad amongst all communities. Dishonourable conduct would break any Ministry or organisation in the end. . . .If you want real peace, there is no other way except to have mutual trust and confidence. If Shamsuddin Saheb and his colleagues do not mean what they have



said, you will know. *I for one would not wish to be a living witness to such a tragedy.*”

## 3

Gandhiji's non-violence was essentially an instrument of redress. Peace with the opponent was sought never at the cost of justice but for the vindication of justice. It was its effectiveness in this regard that gave to his non-violence its revolutionary and dynamic character. This aspect of it came more and more to the fore as his venture in Noakhali progressed.

Early on the morning of the 24th November, Sarat Chandra Bose, the well-known Bengal Congress leader, with a number of friends from Calcutta, had a two-hour talk with Gandhiji at Srirampur in regard to the Government's peace proposals. Sarat Bose said that he had met the Chief Minister in Calcutta and suggested to him that they should proceed to Noakhali and jointly work for some time to restore confidence among the members of the minority community there before effective Peace Committees could be formed, but to no effect. The Ministers had been talking a lot but had given no tangible indication of a real change of heart. Gandhiji agreed that the leaders had sunk to the lowest level but not the common people. Their heart was still sound. “Even in this village I have noticed some response,” he added. “But, of course, I do not build upon it.”

Gandhiji's visitors asked him whether after all that he had heard and seen in East Bengal, he would still say that it was time for peace or whether the time had not come to prepare for war. Were the Muslims sincere about Peace Committees? “Tell us in one word whether it is to be Peace Committees or War Committees?” Without a moment's hesitation, Gandhiji replied: “We must work for peace. If peace fails, war might result. . . . But peace must always be with honour.”

If the people had the requisite courage, Gandhiji proceeded, they would, of course, return to their original homes without any safeguard, depending upon none but God and their own strength of spirit for their protection. The goonda element would then feel the change in the atmosphere and behave. “I know what I am saying. I come from Kathiawad, a Province notorious for its bandits. I know even they are not beyond redemption.” But it would be mere wishful thinking to believe that the people in Noakhali had developed that courage. “In the present case, therefore,” he concluded, “I would say that peace must also mean reasonable security for life and property. On these conditions alone can the refugees be asked to return.”

One of the Calcutta friends complained that the police were not playing fair. He had said before, Gandhiji told him, that reliance on the British and British-trained military and police was incompatible with



independence; he would now go a step further, and say that it was incompatible with democracy, too. "In a democracy, if you set up a hooligan as the head of the Government, you lie in the bed you have made. The only remedy is to educate and convert the electorate by Satyagraha if necessary. We should be consistent all along. If democracy is good in Bihar, it ought to be good in Bengal, too. I must, therefore, go to the popular, elected Ministers, for they are *my* Ministers. If they fail, public opinion must be created to replace them. That is democracy." But whether it was Bihar or Bengal, people had to learn the art of self-defence—violent or non-violent. Reliance on the military and the police must go in any case. It would degrade them.

Another interviewer asked why the Interim Government at the Centre could not intervene in the case of Bengal as it had done in Bihar? Conversely, if the Interim Government could not interfere in one Province on the ground of Provincial autonomy, how could it do so in another as Pandit Nehru and Dr. Rajendra Prasad had done?

Gandhiji replied that besides being the Vice-President of the Interim Government, Pandit Nehru was a distinguished Congress leader also. As the Vice-President of the Central Cabinet, he could act only within the four corners of the constitution. That did not permit interference with Provincial autonomy of Bengal, where a League Government was in power. But in Bihar, Pandit Nehru and Dr. Rajendra Prasad had status and responsibility as Congressmen, since the Government in Bihar was a Congress Government. Pandit Nehru and Dr. Rajendra Prasad had acted in Bihar in their capacity as Congressmen.

Could not Bihar be controlled by non-violence? asked the persistent questioner. Why did the Congress Ministers resort to the free use of military there?

Certainly, replied Gandhiji, it should have been possible to control Bihar by non-violence. But in Bihar the pitch had been queered by the lesson in organised violence she had had in the past, particularly since August, 1942. "I know the merits of the 1942 struggle. The people were not cowed down by the Government's leonine violence. But all the same, we cannot afford to shut our eyes to our mistakes. We have to learn to do better or else pay the penalty."

The question was next put to him whether by taking up an unbending attitude on conversion, he was not identifying himself with one particular community. How could his stand in this respect be squared with his claim that he regarded all religions as equal? Gandhiji replied that personally he did not mind what religion a person chose to profess. He had nothing to say against conversion, when there was a spontaneous urge from within. But such conversion could not in its very nature be on a mass scale and never for saving one's life or property, or for temporal gain. What had happened in Noakhali was a travesty and negation of all religion.



Finally, the questioner referred to the widespread feeling in Bengal that the Province was being "sacrificed" for the sake of the freedom of India. Gandhiji replied that that was a topsy-turvy way of looking at things. Bengal had always been in the van of the freedom struggle. "Bengal is in the forefront today because Bengal is Bengal. It is her proud privilege." It was Bengal that had produced Bankim Chandra and Tagore as well as the Chittagong armoury raid heroes, however misguided the latter's action appeared in his eyes. Bengal had now to show a higher type of courage. "If Bengal in this juncture plays the game, it will save India. That is why leaving all my old loves, I have today become a Bengali. I have seen enough of ravages in Noakhali to make me weep my eyes out but I am not going to shed a tear for what has happened. We have a long way yet to go."

During the morning walk, in which Sarat Bose joined, Gandhiji remarked that he was beginning to feel that even if Muslim workers were not forthcoming for his peace mission, Hindus alone might do. A handful of such workers, if they were worthy of their salt, could turn the tide. The only condition was that the local Hindus should play the game. The least that he expected of them was that they should eradicate the curse of untouchability root-and-branch from their midst. Otherwise they would never come into their own.

\* \* \*

Not a small part of Gandhiji's effort in Noakhali was spent in bringing home to the Hindu leaders the fallacy of their demand for concentrating the minority community in homogeneous blocks or pockets in East Bengal and for planned migration. The question was discussed at length when a deputation headed by N. C. Chatterjee, the President of the Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, came to see Gandhiji a few days later on the 5th December. Gandhiji showed to them that the sense of security which was thus sought to be created would be illusory since a concentration could always be overwhelmed by superior numbers. It was an unworkable proposition. The Bengal Government would not permit it. "Put yourself in Suhrawardy's place. Imagine for the moment that he is bent on mischief. Would he allow it, if he could help it? It would mean you want to give battle. He must prevent it at any cost. The Muslim mind in Noakhali would not tolerate it. It would mean a perpetuation of the conflict." At best it would mean that the country would be permanently divided up into hostile sections enjoying a sort of an armed truce. "Whether they are many or few, the Hindus of East Bengal have to learn the art of being brave. They should be able to live even in a minority of one, otherwise there is no hope for them in East Bengal. They must never feel. . . helpless. . . . *Courage does not depend upon numbers.*"

"What if the Muslims do not play the game?"

"The Hindus must then be prepared to die but not turn cowards. This is the only solution that is feasible."



We are familiar with the device which the artists sometimes employ to bring out hidden flaws in a picture by viewing it upside down. Gandhiji used that device to bring home the fallacy of the proposition for creating Hindu pockets in Noakhali to the Hindu Mahasabha friends, by taking up its reverse. If it was good for Bengal it ought to hold good in Bihar, too. On the contrary if it could not be extended to Bihar, it could not be in the best interests of the Hindus of Noakhali either. "Suppose, the Muslims of Bihar wanted to create Muslim colony in Bihar; it would be looked upon by the Hindu population of Bihar as a potential menace. No matter what the Hindus might say, I know the authorities would not be able to guarantee the safety of the Muslim minority. By the same token, the creation of pockets can bode no good to the Hindus of East Bengal. The Bengal Government would oppose it because it would amount to an admission that the minority community could not be protected unless it lived on its own strength, on fighting terms with the rest. A Government that made such an admission would stand self-condemned." Besides, by putting forth that demand they would practically be conceding the logic of the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan. For what was Pakistan but a glorified "pocket"? If migration had to take place it must be systematic and complete. The logical ultimate of their proposition would be exchange of populations. That would make their last state worse than the first. It was not therefore to be thought of so long as there was any hope of cooperation.

The wisdom of Gandhiji's decision was vindicated before long. The sinister implications of setting up Muslim "pockets" which some protagonists of the "two-nation" theory were planning in Bihar will be found discussed in the third part of this volume. (see Chapter XV.).

N. C. Chatterjee remarked that so far no-one seemed to have taken to Gandhiji's advice. Gandhiji replied that if even one person stayed and died with non-violent courage, the one would become many. The Hindu Mahasabha leader thereupon rejoined that Gandhiji's scheme was beyond the common man's capacity. Gandhiji replied that it was precisely because there was no other way of saving Hinduism in East Bengal that he pressed for his solution.

Gandhiji's interviewers thanked him for his kindness. Gandhiji replied that it was no kindness at all. If it was kindness, the kindness was to himself. "My own doctrine was failing. I could not bear that. I do not want to die a failure."

"But I may," he added after a pause.

After the Hindu leaders had left, Gandhiji remarked that it was possible that he would have to stay many years in Noakhali, unless of course they killed him. He was ready for that, too, but he believed they did not want his death. For they knew, in their heart of hearts, that he was the friend of the Muslims. If the Hindus and Muslims could not live side by side in brotherly love in Noakhali, he further explained to a

group of friends who saw him on the last day of the month at Srirampur, they would not be able to do so over the whole of India, and Pakistan would be the inevitable result. "India will be divided, and if India is divided she will be lost for ever. Therefore, I say that if India is to remain undivided, Hindus and Muslims must live together in brotherly love, not in hostile camps organised either for defensive action or retaliation. I am, therefore, opposed to the policy of segregation in pockets. There is only one way of solving the problem and that is by non-violence. I know, today mine is a cry in the wilderness. But I repeat that there is no salvation for India except through the way of truth, non-violence, courage and love. To demonstrate the efficacy of that way I have come here. If Noakhali is lost India is lost."



## CHAPTER IV

### THE SLOW LEAVEN

#### 1

THE CAUSE of Noakhali evoked universal sympathy. People all over India were eager to help with money and material. The Ahmadiya sect of Muslims from the Punjab sent a donation of rupees five thousand. In his letter forwarding the amount, the Secretary of the Association wrote to Gandhiji: "I have to mention in this connection that Islam, as a principle, stands for the assistance and emancipation of all the distressed and down-trodden, irrespective of class or creed and we. . . consider it our sacred duty to render every possible help and cooperation for the relief of the distressed, whosoever they may be." Another cheque for Rs. 650 with two hundred pairs of conch bangles and a pound of vermilion for distribution among Hindu women, who had suffered during the disturbances, came from Assam. The donors included eleven Muslims and a European.

Gandhiji's problem was twofold. There was a danger that the riot-affected refugees might develop a mentality of dependence on public charity. This had to be guarded against. At the same time, it was necessary to guard against the danger of the authorities slipping into slackness and easy-going complacency if the public took up the burden of looking after the needs of those in distress. The continued existence of the refugee camps was a headache to the authorities, apart from the stigma it carried. But instead of taking energetic measures to create conditions of security and providing facilities for rehabilitation, to induce displaced persons to return to their homes, as they ought to have done, the authorities tried to squeeze them out by threatening to stop distribution of free rations in the camps. Gandhiji felt that was wrong. So long as an atmosphere of security was not created in the villages, arrangements for free Government relief should continue.

The case of public charitable institutions stood on a different footing. It was for them, Gandhiji told them, plainly to tell people that whether they were poor or rich, they should consider it beneath their dignity to accept doles from the Government or anybody else. Those who had lost their all had a claim upon the State and the State should provide them with vital necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter and medical assistance. But they would be robbing society if they accepted these without each healthy man, woman or child labouring to the



extent of his or her capacity. They should ask the Government to provide them with such work as they were capable of doing. If people shed their aversion to labour and adapted themselves to unexpected changes of fortune, it would take them a long way towards the acquisition of that fearlessness which was an essential condition of the survival of the minority community in East Bengal.

There were about 30 relief organisations and half a dozen medical missions operating in Noakhali, besides about 20 centres working under Gandhiji's one-village-one-worker plan. Gandhiji's standing instructions to one and all were that they must keep truth and non-violence always in the forefront. All their activities must be *bona fide*, open and above-board. There must be nothing secret, nothing calculated to make the members of the majority community feel nervous or to give the authorities a legitimate cause for suspicion. When a medical mission proposed to carry on rescue and relief work in the course of its medical work, he put his foot down upon it saying that would be sailing under false colours. Similarly, he vetoed the plan of a woman worker to introduce physical training and drill amongst the women and girls under her charge, though he was not opposed to physical training and drill for women as such. Another worker asked him whether the use of "organisation" for "defensive purpose" was permissible. He scribbled in reply: "Difference between defensive and aggressive is wholly unconvincing and meaningless. You cannot blow hot and cold. You can have either hate or love."

There were numerous requests from individuals and organisations from all parts of India to be permitted to come and work under his guidance in Noakhali. The keystone of his plan being exhibition of personal courage that comes from a living faith in God, he argued, large numbers were not only unnecessary; they could even be inimical to success. Therefore, he dissuaded all of them from coming to Noakhali. The only exception he made was in the case of a party of Indian National Army people. Sardar Patel, ever vigilant, had been watching with growing uneasiness the situation that was developing in Noakhali. Perhaps he felt concerned about Gandhiji's personal safety, too. When, therefore, the leader of an I.N.A. group, Sardar Niranjan Singh Gill, approached him with an offer to proceed with a party of his men to Noakhali to serve under Gandhiji, he welcomed it. The presence of brave, unarmed Sikhs in the midst of riot-stricken Hindu masses might infuse non-violent courage among them. The I.N.A. had built up a fine tradition of bravery and patriotism under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Bose. They had banished communalism wholly from their midst whilst they were under colours. "We had worked in the Indian National Army," ran one of their manifestos, "and we are happy to be able to say that we had forgotten all distinctions of caste, creed or Province. It was *Jai Hind* for all of us. The memory of those days still



persists.” Before their final surrender, Netaji had told them by way of parting advice that on their return to India, they would have to convert themselves into soldiers of non-violence and take their orders from Gandhiji.

Gandhiji accepted the services of the I.N.A. group on condition that they should first obtain permission *in writing* from Shaheed Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister, to work in Noakhali. The Chief Minister was at first reluctant. It was very difficult for him to permit I.N.A. people to work in Noakhali, he said to Col. Jiwan Singh who met him in this connection, as he was already being criticised by the Muslims for allowing people from outside to work in Bengal. He read out a letter written to him by some Muslim members of the Legislative Assembly from Tipperah and Noakhali accusing Gandhiji of prolonging his stay in Noakhali for a political purpose. He owed his position, the Chief Minister went on to say, to the support of the Muslim League members of the Assembly. It was they who kept him in power. How could he go against their wishes? Why did not the I.N.A. men go and work in Bihar amongst the Muslim sufferers? After some discussion, however, he gave his consent to their plan of work. The Muslim League policy at that time was to woo the Sikhs in order to bring them into their “grouping” plan. A “Muslim zone” in the north-west according to the conception of the Muslim League or the Cabinet Mission’s plan of 16th May, 1946, could not be formed and the partition of the Punjab would be inevitable if the Sikhs of the Punjab kept out of the Section in the Constituent Assembly, and the Chief Minister did not want to antagonise them unnecessarily.

The leader of the I.N.A. group had asked for provision to be made for 1,000 persons. Gandhiji trimmed it down to 100. Their actual number never exceeded 50. The group included a Muslim from East Bengal, a Muslim from the Punjab and a non-Sikh from South India. Ultimately, the bulk of the I.N.A. men were sent back. A small batch under Col. Jiwan Singh continued to be in-charge of Gandhiji’s camp at Srirampur and during his village to village journey on foot. Even they were sent back when Gandhiji proceeded to Bihar in March, 1947, leaving Jiwan Singh alone to work in Noakhali with other members of his own party.

It was Gandhiji’s expectation that since these people had voluntarily discarded the use of arms after proving their mettle on the battle-field, they would be able to set an example of the non-violence of the strong with exceptional advantage. The Sardar was ready to provide the necessary finances for their upkeep either out of Congress funds or some other source but Gandhiji insisted that for their financial support, the I.N.A. group should depend not upon Congress funds or private sources, including funds at his disposal, but upon open public support by both Hindus and Muslims. The power of non-violence could not be built on



money-power but the faith and confidence of all the communities, including the one from which the aggressors came. Even a suspicion of financial assistance from the Congress would be fatal to his plan. They must be like *cæsar's* wife — above suspicion.

To make assurance doubly sure, he wrote to the Chief Minister that the I.N.A. people could be with him only as the accepted friends of both Hindus and Muslims. He could not entertain them on any other terms. The Chief Minister should, therefore, if he *really* approved of their activity, subscribe, even if it were one rupee, as a token of his approval, to the I.N.A. men's appeal for funds. To Sardar Patel he wrote:

My conviction is hardening every day as a result of experience that an edifice built upon money tumbles down like a house of cards. Cease to put your faith in money therefore. It is essential that there should not be the slightest deviation from what he (Sardar Gill) has agreed to with me. I am firmly resolved to get out of this whole business the moment I discover that there is the slightest tinge of impurity in it. It is a very delicate task I am engaged in. It may be the biggest in my life.<sup>1</sup>

A few days later, he again wrote to the Sardar: "By making money our god, we dethrone God."<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

Slowly and steadily the leaven worked. By the end of his six weeks' stay at Srirampur, Gandhiji had won many hearts. Groups of Muslim men, women and children collected in front of their huts with presents of fruit to greet him when he went out for his morning and evening walks. There was an instinctive recognition that he was of them, united to them with bonds of common humanity that transcends all barriers of caste and creed. And the transformation was not confined to Muslims alone. The Hindus, too, began to revive under the message of love. Shortly before the prayer on the 4th December, a procession of about 600 Hindu men, women and children arrived from the neighbouring villages after walking a distance of six miles singing the *namasamkirtan* to the accompaniment of *khol* and *kartala*. It was a spectacle to delight and uplift any heart but it set Gandhiji thinking whether the chanting really came from their hearts or only from their throats. "A parrot also can repeat what it has learnt from its master. There is hardly any virtue when we sing the praise of God, living in safety. It becomes real only when it comes to us in the midst of danger and distress."<sup>3</sup>

"Gandhiji's continued presence in Noakhali is resulting in a slow but steady restoration of confidence among the affected people," reported a newsman to his paper in the third week of December. "Evacuees are now returning to their homes."<sup>4</sup> "The Mahatma's method of solving the communal problem has been found to be a super-method," reported



another witness. "It may take time to yield its fullest results; it does always when it is an appeal to the soul but it is always a surer and more lasting method. . . . It is not a peace dictated from above but worked up from within."<sup>5</sup>

Illustrative of the change were two letters from Rajaji. On the 19th November, on the eve of Gandhiji's departure to Srirampur, in a letter to me he wrote: "When is Bapu coming back? What is the good of remaining there so long? . . . All the good that can result has already resulted. . . . What is the good of under-feeding? It is dangerous." Two weeks later, he wrote to Gandhiji:

I have been silently watching and reading the reports that appear about your work there. There is not much in the newspaper reports but one can read a lot between the lines if one thinks it out with some imagination. I agree with you that the work you are on is great in every way and all else must give way. I have been thinking it over for some days past. My note to you was wrong. You are now—I think for the first time in some respects—putting into the field positive Ahimsa. And you will win. And it will be most valuable. . . . I expect your new experience will unfold altogether new lines of thought and action and you will come back richer. God willing our problems may be solved. My love and fullest confidence.<sup>6</sup>

To Gandhiji, however, the "petty done" was only a symbol and reminder of the "undone vast". When about the close of his sojourn at Srirampur, someone asked him what had been the effect of his stay in their midst, his reply was that there was nothing tangible he could show "but then non-violence often works in unseen ways."

Long after Gandhiji had left Noakhali, a poor old Muslim one day accosted Satish Chandra Das Gupta on his morning walk and asked him when "Gandhi Baba" would be returning to Noakhali. "Well, well, he *will* come some time," replied Satish Babu. "But when?" persisted this Muslim inquirer, and then added with a sigh: "If *he* were here, he at least would have cared for us. Who else is there to feel for our woes!"

## 2

In spite of his anxiety to be left by himself Gandhiji could not be quite alone. His little cottage in that rather inaccessible place where, in spite of numerous signboards put up by the I.N.A. volunteers, visitors often lost their way in the thick jungle—I at least did over a dozen times!—became like a magnet not only to the inhabitants of the surrounding area but also to people from the remotest corners of India and even outside. A contingent of Press reporters had accompanied him from Calcutta. Some of them followed him to Srirampur. Gandhiji did not like publicity but he could not prevent them from following him. All he could do was to make stringent regulations to keep down their numbers.



He gave strict instructions that they were not to quarter themselves upon his hosts or even upon the people of the village, but to make their own arrangements. This they did. Later when his stenographer had to leave him, two of them—Sailen of U.P.I. and Rangaswamy of *The Hindu*—took over his typing as a labour of love.

Among those who sought him out at Srirampur towards the close of his stay was M. Raymond Cartier, a French journalist on his way to Indo-China. Gandhiji had read French as his second language for his London matriculation and was not a little proud of his having gone through the whole of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in the original. He greeted his French visitor with a familiar *Comment allez vous?*—"How do you do?"—and then added with loud laughter that he had exhausted his entire stock of French!

M. Cartier asked him what he thought of the situation in Europe. Gandhiji replied that he felt very unhappy about it. Politicians were talking peace but were preparing for war. The evil consequences of the last war had obviously not disillusioned them. When the last war began, he had said that unless humanity changed its method of settling international disputes, European civilisation was doomed. He recalled in that connection the open letters he had addressed to Hitler, to the English people and to the Japanese. The vengeance that was being wreaked on the vanquished nations was diabolical. "If this dependence on violence continues, the world will destroy itself."

"But we are children of violence," interposed M. Cartier.

"The children of violence will commit suicide and perish unless they turn away from violence," answered Gandhiji.

The remedy certainly lay in education of a new type for a new world but not of the type that Hitler and Mussolini gave. "They only perfected what America and England had done to further the ends of war. That type of education won't do for the purpose of eradicating war."

M. Cartier next asked, how France could have at all survived if it had not defended itself against the Nazi hordes. Gandhiji replied that for that matter even the Maginot Line had not availed them much. Hitler had reduced it to nothingness. M. Cartier said that the fault lay not in the principle; it was a technical flaw in the Maginot Line to which military strategists attributed its collapse.

"May be," rejoined Gandhiji, "but, beyond that there is a deeper flaw which is fundamental to the whole philosophy of the Maginot Line. Unless you can better Hitler in violence, you cannot gain victory. But the moment you do that, it is Hitlerism that wins and the whole plan of eradicating violence by superior violence is reduced to futility. It is by non-violence alone that you can vanquish Hitlerism or any other species of violence. If I were a Parisian and the Germans invaded my city, I would stir up the Parisians, so that they would lay down their lives to the last man in the defence of their city, not as they did in the



last war, but by showing that higher type of courage which the conquest of violence by non-violence calls for. That is what I am trying to evolve in Noakhali. How far I shall succeed I do not know."

On Christmas day, a Christian friend brought Gandhiji a Christmas present from a woman member of the Friends Service Unit. It was a soldier's kit, containing cigarettes, socks, playing-cards, some note-paper, towels, soap, and so on! It provided Gandhiji with a light interlude. The cigarettes were kept for Pandit Nehru who was expected to arrive in a couple of days; other articles were appropriately sent as "love-tokens" to other members of the party in different camps.

Gandhiji's rigorous self-discipline never made him intolerant of others who could not follow him in that respect. He was never censorious or inquisitorial in his outlook. His searching eye took note of everything but never judged. He gave those who held him in affection his co-operation if they needed it in attaining self-discipline but did not interfere with their lives. For instance, he did not take tea or coffee himself on ground of self-discipline and also as he held that they were harmful to health. He had written strongly against both, but he had them served to those who could not do without them. On one occasion, during a railway journey, he himself went out and fetched a tray of tea from the railway tea-stall for his companions while they were still sleeping. The aim always was to wean the person concerned from his weakness. But there was no compulsion except that of love which is all the more compelling because it is neither harsh nor coercive. It redeems. When a person feels he is being judged, he is put on the defensive. Gandhiji never let this happen.

Some members of the old Anusilan Party, a terrorist organisation, came to interview him later in the day. They wanted to place their services at his disposal. One of them, Trailokya Chakravarty, known as Maharaj, told Gandhiji that they did not know how to find an antidote to the terrible fear, which seemed to hold the people in its grip, by the method to which they had been accustomed all their lives. They felt, therefore, that it was now Gandhiji's era and not their own, which had been only its precursor.

Another visitor asked Gandhiji how self-protection could be organised among the Hindus, so as to be effective without aggravating the Muslim sentiment against the Hindus. Gandhiji answered that any organisation along violent lines would only result in a race for armaments on a small scale between the two communities. That would be disastrous for India in the end. Bengal had tried the method of violence but it had failed to affect the common people. On the other hand, the non-violence of the past 25 years, which the Congress under him had practised, however lame, had succeeded in raising the morale of the people as a whole. Organisation along non-violent lines, therefore, was the only method which he could recommend.



He followed it up at the evening prayer by a discourse on charity by explaining to the congregation the celebrated verses from St. Paul (Corinthians I, 13) in which the Apostle tells the Corinthians that while all the gifts of heaven, i.e., the power of speech, the power of prophecy, the gift of healing, etc., are to be prized, he can show them a way which is better than any other since it is available to all, namely, the way of charity or love. All cannot be Apostles, Prophets or Teachers but all can exhibit in their lives the power of love:

I may speak with every tongue that men and angels use; yet, if I lack charity, I am no better than echoing bronze, or the clash of cymbals. I may have powers of prophecy, no secret hidden from me, no knowledge too deep for me; I may have utter faith, so that I can move mountains; yet if I lack charity, I count for nothing. I may give away all that I have, to feed the poor; I may give myself up to be burnt at the stake; if I lack charity, it goes for nothing. Charity is patient, is kind; charity feels no envy; charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent; does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury; takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices at the victory of truth; sustains, believes, hopes, endures, to the last. The time will come when we shall outgrow prophecy, when speaking with tongues will come to an end, when knowledge will be swept away; we shall never have finished with charity. Our knowledge, our prophecy, are only glimpses of the truth; and these glimpses will be swept away when the time of fulfilment comes. (Just so, when I was a child, I talked like a child, I had the intelligence, the thoughts of a child; since I became a man, I have outgrown childish ways.) At present, we are looking at a confused reflection in a mirror; then, we shall see face to face; now, I have only glimpses of knowledge; then, I shall recognise God as He has recognised me. Meanwhile, faith, hope and charity persist, all three; but the greatest of them all is charity.

A heavy mail-bag next day brought among Christmas presents a copy of a beautiful edition of the Bible. Gandhiji's countenance beamed as he received it and for some time he fondly turned over its pages with reverential regard. Shortly afterwards, the Secretary of the Ramgunj Peace Committee arrived. He brought a report that the rice that was being distributed to the refugees was extremely bad. Gandhiji got a sample, that had been brought to him, examined. Upon being cooked it was found to be uneatable. Another sample that had at the same time been sent to the Superintendent of the hospital at Ramgunj was likewise found to be "quite unfit for human consumption". Gandhiji's advice was that if all the rice supplied was of that character, they should refuse to accept it. But before this was done the refugees should approach the authorities, try to understand their difficulty and ask for a supply of good rice. This was the only attitude compatible with non-violence. If the Government failed to supply eatable rice to the full extent of their ration, they should accept whatever was available, if it was just enough



to keep body and soul together, and give the Government a fortnight's respite to improve matters. If even after that things did not improve, there would be a case for total refusal of rations. But the time for it was not yet.

## 3

The Indian Medical Association had started a medical relief centre at Madhupur, a village a mile and a half from Srirampur. Gandhiji was invited to hold a prayer meeting there on the occasion of the opening of the indoor hospital. Gandhiji accepted the invitation and utilised the opportunity to present to them his philosophy of nature-cure. He told them that his experience, as the years rolled by, had been that there was no greater healer than God. It was only when man departed from the laws of nature that he suffered from diseases of body and mind. It was usual for the medical profession to pay heed to the body to the neglect of the mind and spirit. The result was bad. The health of all the three should be their concern. In Noakhali, the chief malady was fear; a craven feeling which not only benumbed people's senses but also inhibited every attempt to restore conditions of healthy normal living. They should make it their job to provide an antidote for this fear by displaying in their own person and cultivating in others the non-violent type of courage which comes from an abiding faith in God, instead of making a god of their physical body.

He had heard that Muslim villagers would not go to Hindu doctors. He told the local Muslims that it was wrong. The medical profession knew no distinction between man and man. He advised the doctors, who were working in Noakhali, not to depend on foreign drugs. The countryside was teeming with potent medical herbs. Ayurvedic and Unani physicians made wide use of them. Should doctors with Western learning not make use of cheap remedies likewise? As an illustration, he mentioned Sir P. C. Ray, the founder of the celebrated Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works, who did not himself use many of the products turned out by the Works, which was his child. When asked about it, he sardonically replied that those products were meant for "educated fools"; he had no mind to add to their number by himself going in for them!

About a hundred workers from villages round about Srirampur came to consult Gandhiji on the 13th December. They wanted to organise themselves into a *Rakshi Dal*—Protection League. The name *Rakshi Dal* did not appeal to Gandhiji. Who could pretend to be the "protector" of another? Each one had to learn the art of self-protection whether it was a child of ten, a young girl, or a grown-up man. If they felt they could protect themselves and others by means of violence alone, they should learn the art of warfare and the use of arms. But in such an



enterprise he could give them little aid. Not only that, it had been his uniform experience that those who set out to protect others with the sword ended by turning oppressors themselves. Under his plan, not many men were needed in a village for the protection of the few against many. One or two could be enough. If they laid down their lives in the performance of their duty without flinching and without anger in their hearts, their example would probably inspire others to exhibit non-violent courage likewise, so that they would either be able to melt the hearts of their oppressors or die in the act of defending their self-respect and honour in a non-violent way. He, therefore, advised the workers to turn themselves into *sevaks* or servants rather than "protectors".

An interesting suggestion was made by a local Congress worker in connection with the repatriation of refugees to their villages, viz., that in order to restore self-confidence and strength to them, instead of living separately in their respective homes, they should live together, mess together, work together in one or two selected *badis* in their respective villages and collectively cultivate their fields and harvest and enjoy their crop collectively. To that end, Gandhiji should issue an appeal inviting refugees scattered in different parts of the country to return to their villages and young men to enrol themselves as volunteers to reside with the refugees. Gandhiji replied that the suggestion was good if it could be worked. But he was afraid it was unrealistic. "If they (the refugees) had the required spirit of cooperation, it would be possible. But it is a plant of slow growth and *personal courage does not come even from cooperation*. It comes when it does come, because it is a virtue which is its own reward. Therefore, the principle that there should be volunteers who would go to each one of the affected villages is perfectly sound. You may have noticed that I have been giving effect to it myself and I have made a beginning. Those who came with me from Sevagram are following suit. Whether they will prove themselves worthy of the great trust reposed in them remains to be seen. That may be said even about myself. Only I am not following anybody but am the originator, so far as I am concerned, of the idea. Therefore, if you have any such volunteers in view with the requisite qualifications, please send me their names and addresses."<sup>7</sup>

He did not want to make a public appeal, he explained, because the right quality of men and women would not come in answer to an advertisement. "They have to be persons of sterling worth and equally high courage. . . full of Ahimsa, i.e., respect for the Muslims. It would be a pity if these volunteers started with distrust. Real courage is based on trust which is the surest foundation for it."

Besides, if he allowed volunteers, who might be attracted by the glamour of his presence to inundate Noakhali, it would create unhealthy excitement and cause the authorities and the local Muslims unnecessary trepidation. To make an individual act non-violently he has to be put



absolutely at his ease first. Meticulously correct conduct on their part would put the local Muslims and the Bengal Government on their honour. "I am watching what the Government are doing," he concluded. "People cannot be *compelled* to return to their villages. It would be a disastrous experiment in my opinion."

On the last day of the dying year, two friends placed before Gandhiji a dilemma which faced them and the affected community in Noakhali everywhere. The Muslims said, they were willing to receive the refugees back in their villages provided they withdrew the criminal cases arising out of the disturbances. The Hindu refugees were afraid that unless they agreed to drop the cases they would not be allowed to live in peace. To proceed with the cases would be to invite trouble. What were the workers and the riot-affected people to do? Gandhiji told the workers that there were only two alternatives before those who had committed the crimes. They could admit the crimes and justify their conduct on the ground that whatever they had done was under advice, solely for the establishment of Pakistan without any personal motive and face the consequences. Or, they should repent and submit to the penalty of law by way of expiation. But to suggest that the cases should be dropped by way of "compromise" to facilitate the restoration of good relations between the two communities had no meaning. To confess one's misdeeds merely in order to escape the penalty was no confession. There was no repentance in it. If they were really repentant they should face the punishment courageously. "I know, if the cases are proceeded with, you will be up against trouble. There may be a recrudescence of arson and murder, and at the trial the culprits may after all be acquitted. It might even lead to vendetta. But workers must be prepared to face all that. There should be no compromise out of fear. Their task was to make the villagers brave and courageous, not to make cowards of them. "They may not be able to protect their lives but they can teach them by laying down their own non-violently, how to protect their honour and religion. The people may then kill and get killed, if they cannot defend themselves in a non-violent way. The workers will have done their part."

"Don't you think that the dictates of non-violence and friendship demand withdrawal or dropping of cases against the Muslims?" he was asked by some Muslims.

He did not know, replied Gandhiji, if there was much non-violence in the air. But even non-violent conduct could not arrest the course of law. *In any case the non-violent conduct on the part of the frightened and injured party could not operate until the culprits declared themselves and were penitent.* The fact, however, was that not only was there no penitence on the part of the culprits, but they were absconding. They could not be let off. At the same time he was for severe punishment of those who might be proved to have manufactured false complaints.

Some time afterwards, Muslims in the area where I was stationed



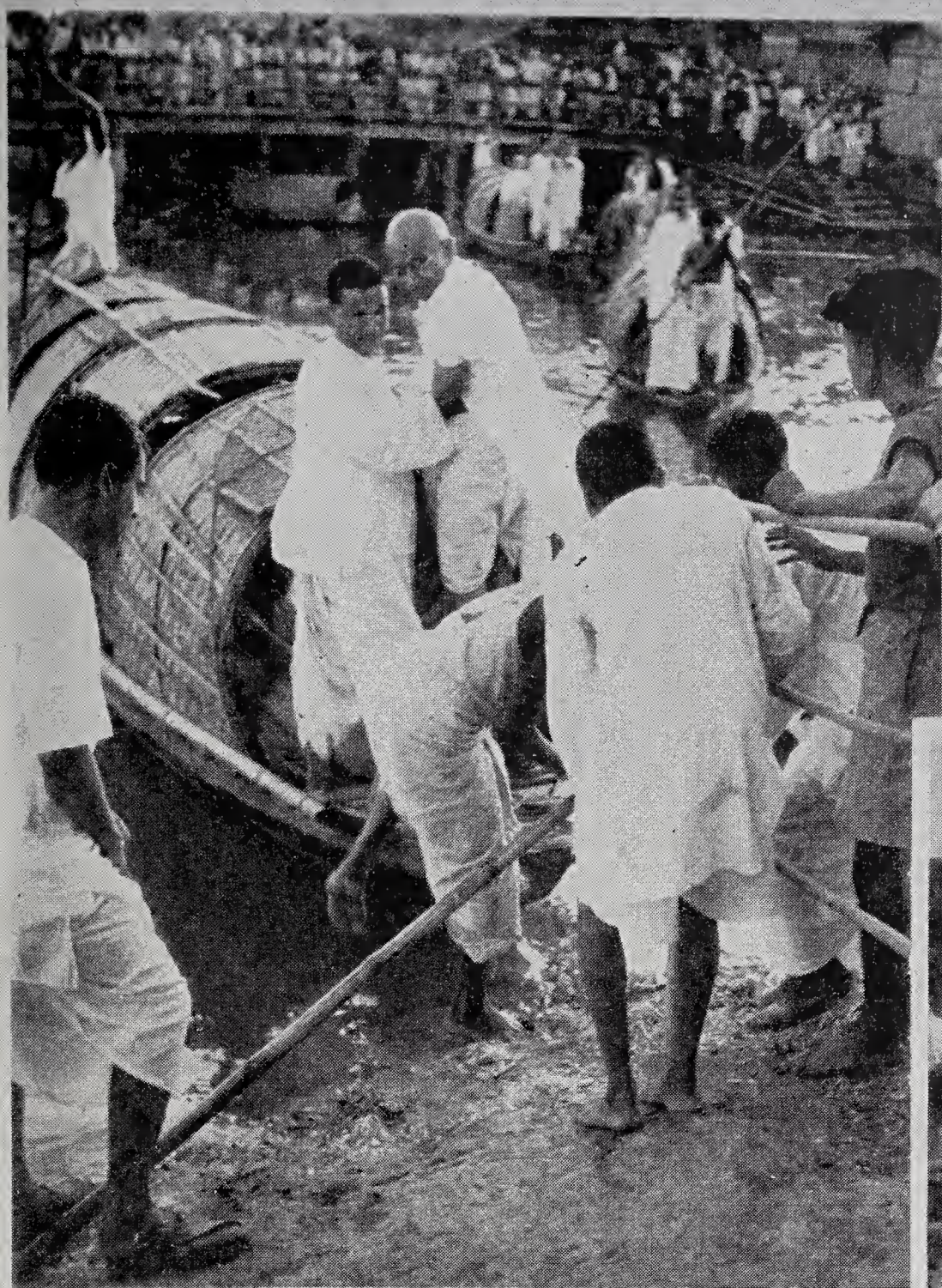
complained that they were not invited to inter-caste dinners which we were organising for the removal of untouchability. Their argument was that untouchability could not be given up in relation to Harijans and retained in respect of Muslims. Academically, their argument was flawless. But I felt I had better consult Gandhiji about it. His reply showed how wide-awake and alert a Satyagrahi has to be in handling the living law of Satyagraha and what scientific precision is required in its correct application. He had told us time and again that the Hindu-Muslim question had its root in untouchability and he had uncompromisingly denounced touch-me-notism in Hinduism. In his Ashram, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Harijans all dined together in the common kitchen without any distinction. But he explained that this was not the occasion for Muslims to put forth such a demand and for the oppressed Hindus to concede it. It was only the other day that the Muslims had forcibly converted them and made them dine with them and take forbidden food under duress. The victims must first learn to be courageous before they could be magnanimous. It was not toleration but cowardice to concede out of fear anything backed by an actual or potential threat.

At another place the Press party that had come to cover Gandhiji's mission in Noakhali, had arranged a common dinner for Hindus and Muslims in their camp. Some of the rehabilitated refugees felt panicky and said that if they agreed to dine with the Muslims, the Muslims might next ask that they should recite the Kalima and even give their daughters in marriage to them. Gandhiji tried to explain to them that the age-old touch-me-notism among the Hindus in regard to eating and drinking was an outmoded custom. It could not be continued indefinitely and it was high time that they discarded it. But he recognised that their fear was not groundless. He would not, therefore, he said, lay down the rule for them but leave them to decide for themselves as they felt prompted. The common dinner in consequence was not held on the poor man's premises, where the Press party had camped, but at the place where Gandhiji was staying and where the morale of the people stood high as a result of his presence. Further, to set an object lesson to the Hindus, he sent a woman member of his party to attend it.

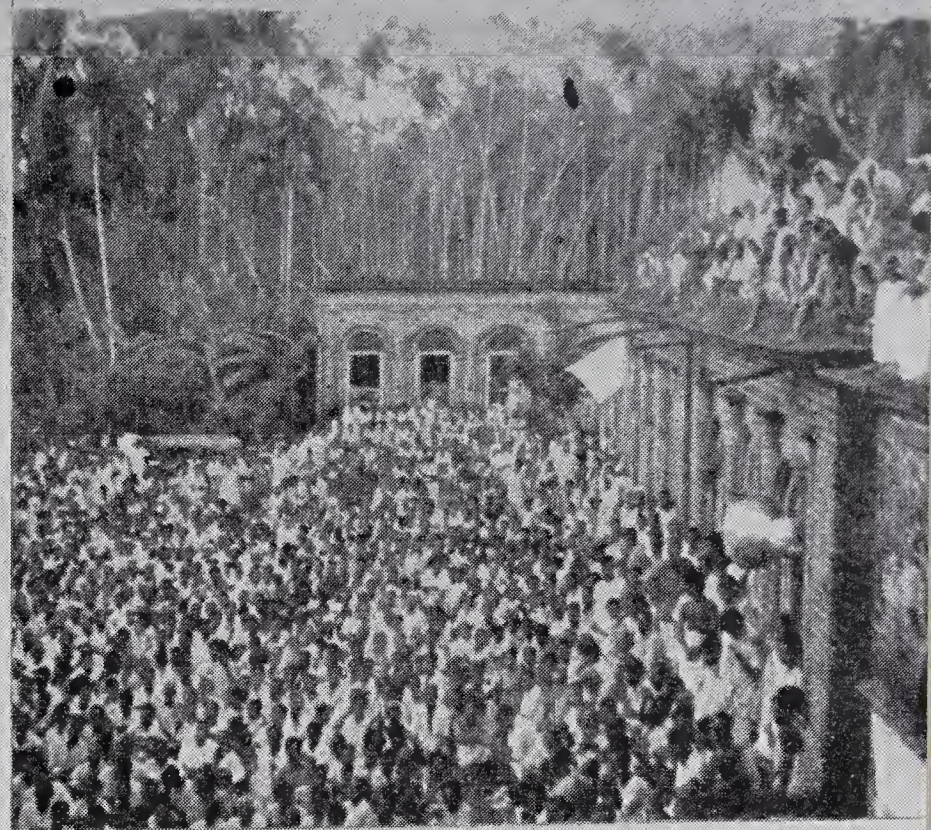
Addressing a gathering of the Muslims a couple of days later, Gandhiji told them that whilst he and his companions did not believe in pollution by touch and personally he had not the slightest compunction in dining with anyone irrespective of caste or creed, it was for the Muslim brethren to bear with those who might not have overcome their scruples in that regard. "I hold the custom to be wrong; in time it will go. But in the meantime Muslims must realise that interdining is not an essential feature of mutual love. Let it not obscure from you genuine love wherever you may find it. That in itself would help to bridge the gulf."

Thus, like an expert physician, he varied his prescription according

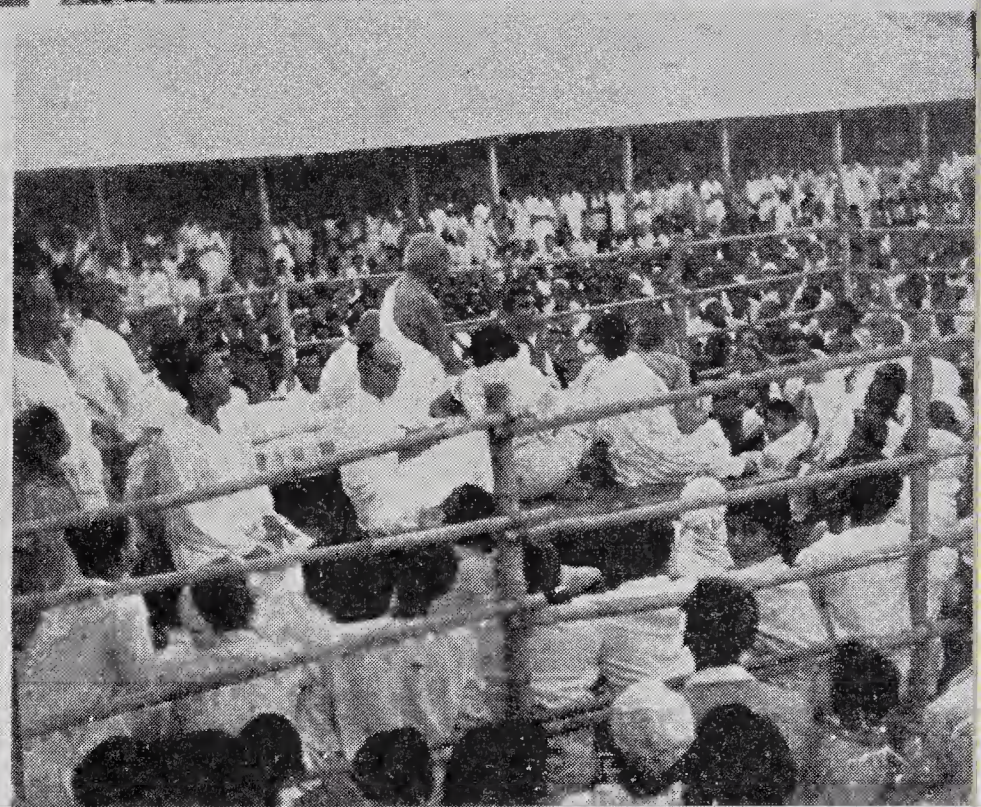




1



3



2



1. Charu Chowdhury taking Gandhiji to his first prayer meeting at Choumuhani. 2. At the prayer meeting "80 per cent . . . were Muslims." (page 21) Bottom: Addressing refugees at Dattapara camp. "Even God could not help the cowardly." (page 27) Standing on Gandhiji's left is Edward McInerney, the District Magistrate. 3. A section of the crowd.

[ONE





①



⑤



②



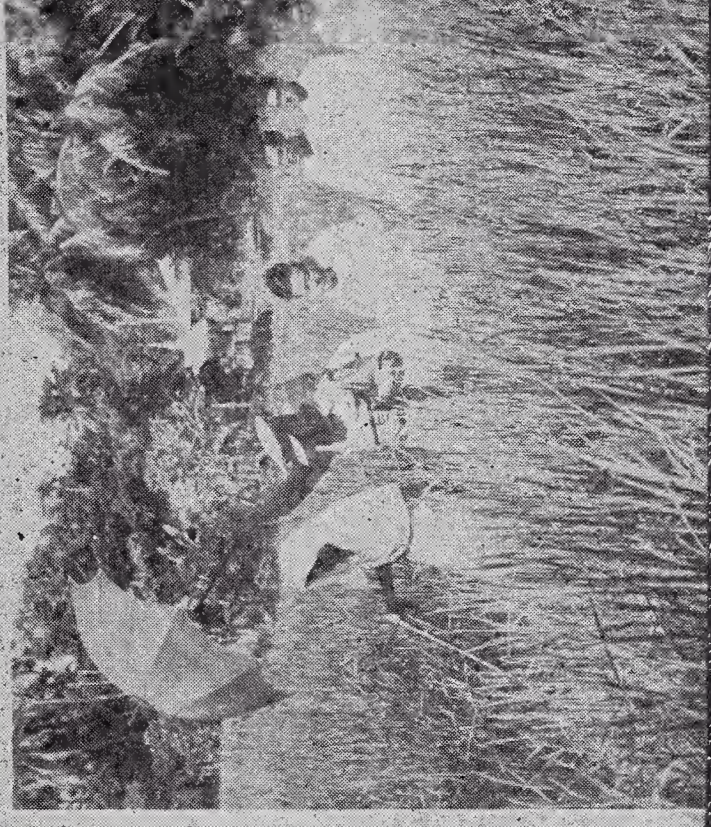
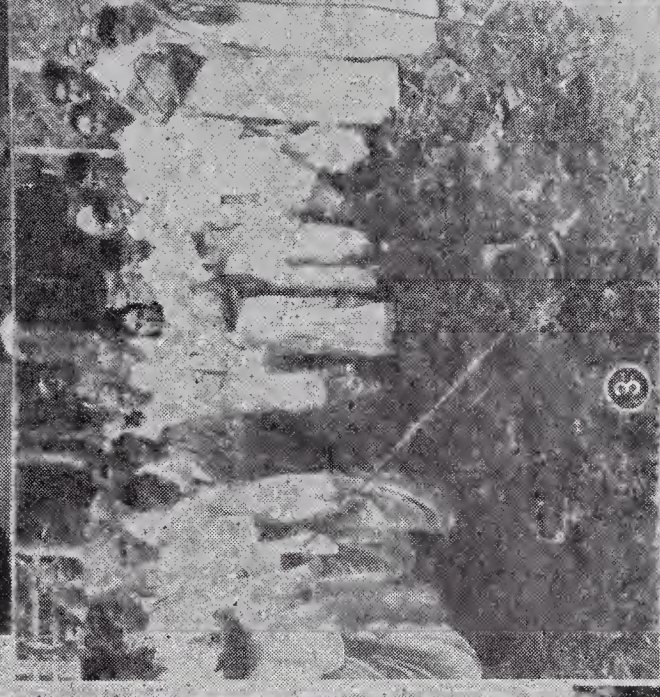
③



④

TWO] *Into the Heart of Devastation.* "The loveliness of nature was all around . . . but the human scene that met the eye froze one's blood." (page 23) Leading the column in (1) are Nasrulla Khan, Parliamentary Secretary, and Abdullah, Superintendent of Police,



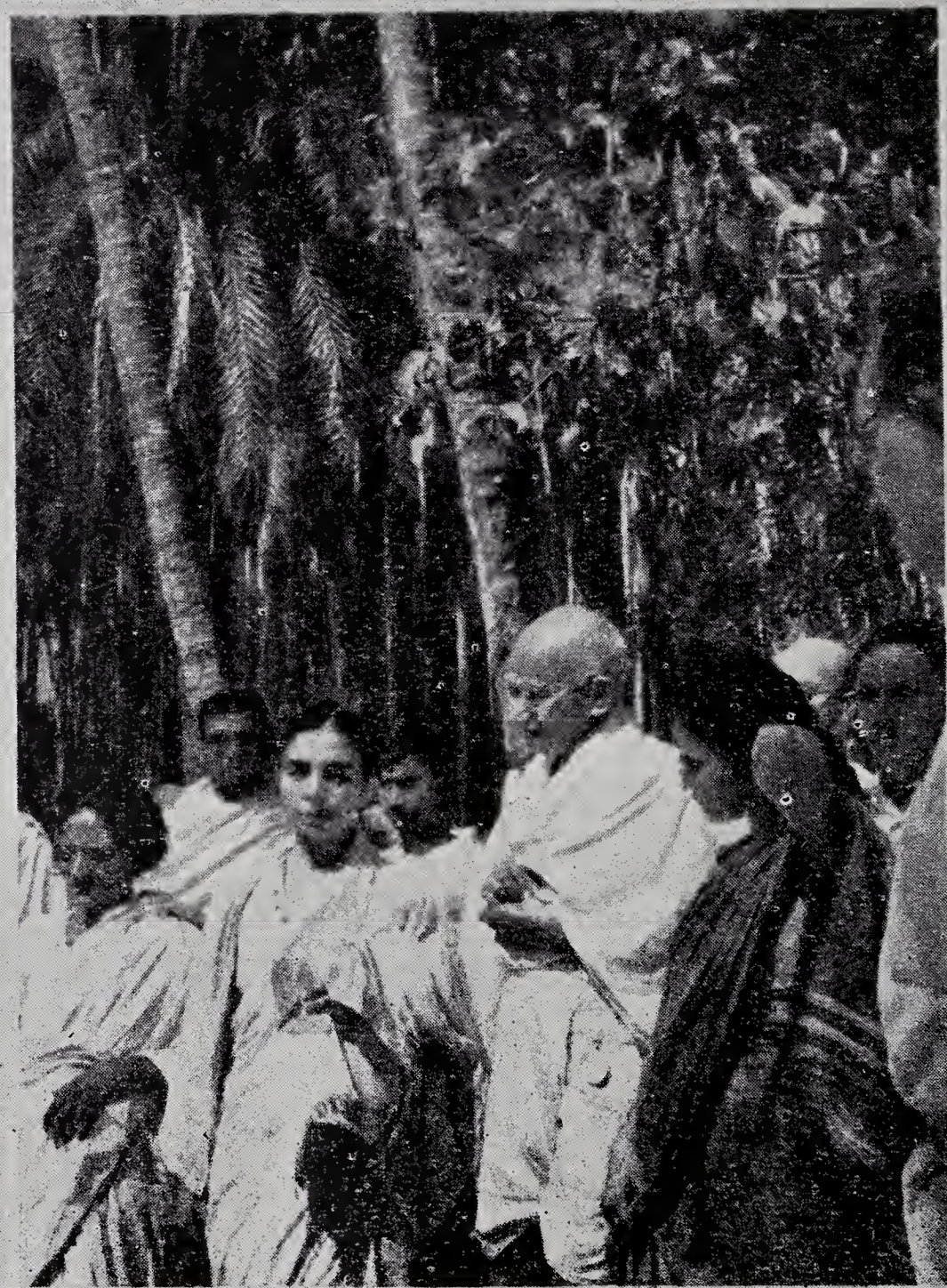


*Into the Heart of Devastation.* 1, 2 & 3. The dog led the way and took Gandhiji to the remains of his massacred masters. (page 28-29) [THREE  
4. Consoling bereaved women. (page 142) 5 & 6. On way to Gopairbag and Sonachak. 7. Visiting a defiled temple.





1



3



2



4

FOUR]

2. Breaking up his camp at Kazirkhil; 3. Gandhiji set out for his lone sojourn. 1 & 4. "Many voices were husky, many eyes dim with tears as the tiny . . . country craft bearing him passed under the arches of the Ramgunj bridge . . . in the direction of Srirampur." (page 36)





①

অজানত উদ্ভাসিত হৃদয়  
 যত্নে চলেছে তেঁদের পদ  
 দখল করছে সবদিক  
 হৃদয়  
 অজানত উদ্ভাসিত হৃদয়  
 যত্নে চলেছে তেঁদের পদ  
 দখল করছে সবদিক  
 হৃদয়  
 অজানত উদ্ভাসিত হৃদয়  
 যত্নে চলেছে তেঁদের পদ  
 দখল করছে সবদিক  
 হৃদয়

④

মা if this world is finite  
 correct your old  
 show me the correct  
 path মা মা. আম  
 মা মা আম আমো  
 মো মা আম না মো  
 মা মা মা মা মো  
 মা মা মা মা মো  
 দখল করছে সবদিক  
 হৃদয়  
 অজানত উদ্ভাসিত হৃদয়  
 যত্নে চলেছে তেঁদের পদ  
 দখল করছে সবদিক  
 হৃদয়

③

তিন লা তিন তিন আমো

মো মো মা মা কি  
 বাউ মো ও মা মা

খ ঘ ড হ জ  
 জ ঘ ও ট ঠ ড ন  
 ত থ দ ধ ন স ফ ব  
 ভ ষ স হ ঙ খ ষ  
 ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ ঞ  
 ঞ ট ঠ ড থ ফ ভ  
 মো. ক. জ. ষ. ক.

তুমিও তা হৃদয়ের মত হে নিজে। কান্নাখাচ্ছি  
 ২০. ৪. ২৭. ৩৫  
 বান্না মাছি হৃদয় তাই কে কণা জাচ্ছি। শৈল  
 বড়বড় মেশানি কেনা সবিয়ে বাউ. বড়বড়  
 ৩০. ৫. ৪৫. ৩৫  
 ভেববে। রাজে নৈশাট। শৈল তারার বড় মেয়ে  
 আজ কেনা সে। মাথে শৈলব বিয়ে।

⑤



②

Wrestle with Darkness. 1 & 2. Practising crossing of slippery single-log bridges. 3 & 4. "Bengali lessons became a sacrament. . . ." 5. "The last exercise was done . . . a few hours before the end." (page 44)



16.12.1946.

My dear Pyarelal,

I am enclosing herewith a copy of a telegram which I have received from the President of the Noakhali Rescue Relief Committee. I have not received any circular letter which was being issued by you regularly. Perhaps it is due to your reported illness. I got three or four such letters; after that there has been a break.

It is difficult to get any information from your side. I do not know what Bapu is doing, but if the facts stated in the telegram are true, I wonder what is the result of all these herculean efforts of Bapu.

In Bihar, after the first week of trouble, when order was restored, everything has been quiet. No incident has occurred since then. Bihar Govt is spending Rs.50 lakhs per month for relief of the refugees who get double the rations which they used to get at home. They are not, therefore, inclined to return to their villages. Besides, all the relief work is entrusted to the Muslim League, a large number of workers having come from Aligarh, from the Frontier and the Punjab. They do not allow any good relations to be established between the two communities. This is the problem here, while in Noakhali it appears that the local Muslims would not agree to help unless they get orders from the League. This is a very difficult situation, and we must do something to reconcile the conflict between the two. We must have a uniform policy in both places.

You have seen the debate in the House of Commons and the statement of the Prime Minister on behalf of the Labour Government. A difficult

-2-

situation has been created, and again the Muslim League will be on the war path. There is no prospect of Bapu's returning from that place. Have you any idea of the probable date when he will be able to come out of this trouble?

Yours sincerely,

*Vallabhbhai*

*Pyarelal is returning  
on 15.12.46. from India  
Shashikala & children will be*

Sri. Pyarelal,  
Secretary to Mahatma Gandhi,  
c/o The Noakhali Rescue &  
Rehabilitation Committee,  
Chaudumhani, (Noakhali District  
East Bengal).



2



1



3



1. "Pandit Nehru's visit to Srirampur was like a meteor-burst across the overcast skies of Noakhali." (page 131) 2. "Walk Alone." (page 139) Gandhiji starting on his bare-footed pilgrimage, auspicious red-mark being put on his forehead. 3. "Gandhiji pronounced the hut to be palatial." (page 140) Manu Gandhi washing his feet.

[SEVEN







to the nature of each case. His non-violence was not static or rigid but a living dialectic, calling for adaptation and change with every change in circumstance.

## 4

Gandhiji was a man of faith and prayer. They were his instruments of action, tools in his search for truth. "Life is a very complex thing," he once observed, "and truth and non-violence present problems, which often defy analysis and judgment. One discovers truth and the method of applying it, i.e., Satyagraha or soul force, by patient endeavour and silent prayer."<sup>8</sup>

The highest state is above the "imperfect offices of prayer and praise". In it all feeling of duality or separate existence is abolished. A person who has attained that state becomes a vehicle of the moral law that governs the universe—incapable of an evil thought or wishing harm to anyone. Whatever is not in consonance with that law will not come to him. Love will be "an unerring light, and joy its own security". Prayer is a means for the attainment of that state.

The highest prayer consists in passive contemplation of the immanent, timeless, formless essence. But all the ancients and even moderns have borne testimony that "psychologically, it is all but impossible for the human being to practise contemplation without preparing for it by some kind of adoration and without feeling the need to revert at more or less frequent intervals to intercession and some form at least of petition."<sup>9</sup>

Petitioning in this context can only be for purity and the strength to persevere so that one may have no desire left "except to will what God wills of us"<sup>10</sup> and intercession "the means to, and the expression of, the love of one's neighbour"<sup>11</sup> in the same way as adoration is "the means to, and expression of, the love of God—a love that finds its consummation in the unitive knowledge of the Godhead which is the fruit of contemplation."<sup>12</sup>

The Divine mind is unchangeable, but since that Divinity is also in everyone and everything, the meaning of prayer is to strive "to evoke that Divinity"<sup>13</sup> within us. "You may, therefore," said Gandhiji, "describe it (the prayer) as a continual longing to lose oneself in the Divinity which comprises all."<sup>14</sup>

Even atheists who deny the existence of God do not deny truth. Gandhiji, therefore, came to the conclusion that "rather than say God is Truth I should say Truth is God".<sup>15</sup> It matters little whether one professes to be an atheist or conceives God in one form rather than another. "If you will not parade God, I have no doubt you will parade something else which in the end will prove to be God, for, fortunately there is no-one and nothing else but God in this universe."<sup>16</sup> It, therefore, all depends upon one's temperament, tradition or intellectual conditioning,



said Gandhiji. One man may worship God as Person, another as Force, and still another as Truth or the Law; it makes no difference. "One need only remember that God is the Force among all the forces. All other forces are material. But God is the vital force or spirit which is all-pervading, all-embracing and, therefore, beyond human ken."<sup>17</sup>

"But why pray at all?" the sceptic may ask. "Does God stand in need of prayer to enable Him to do His duty?"

"No," replies Gandhiji. God needs no reminder but man does. Prayer means "an earnest desire to be filled with the spirit of Truth. This desire should be present all the twenty-four hours. But our souls are too dull to have this awareness day and night. Therefore, we offer prayer for a short time in the hope that a time will come when all our conduct will be one continuously sustained prayer."<sup>18</sup> Prayer is "a heart search . . . a call to humility . . . a call to self-purification."<sup>19</sup> "If you would swim on the bosom of the ocean of Truth, you must reduce yourself to zero."<sup>20</sup>

God certainly is irrespective of our belief. "But realisation of God is infinitely more than mere belief. . . . Man often repeats the name of God parrot-wise. . . . The true seeker must have that living faith which will not only dispel the untruth of parrot-wise repetition from within him but also from the hearts of others."<sup>21</sup> This can only come by constant practice. "This is true of all science; how much more true then of the science of all the sciences?"<sup>22</sup> Hence the need for prayer and meditation.

Meditation consists in "closing the eyes and ears of the mind to all else, except the object of one's devotion."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, said Gandhiji, man in praying may be said to worship "his own glorified self",<sup>24</sup> the divine essence, the truth that is within ourselves, within the soul of every being. "At prayer time, our speech is addressed to ourselves and is intended to shake off our torpor. Some of us are intellectually aware of God. . . . None has seen Him face to face. We desire to . . . realise Him, to become one with Him . . . through prayer."<sup>25</sup>

Prayer thus admits of a naturalistic interpretation. It achieves its results not through any extra-mundane intervention but by natural psychological processes. It is not asking in the ordinary sense of the term but an "intense longing to . . . become merely a lump of clay in the Potter's divine hands",<sup>26</sup> to surrender one's will, intellect and physical being to the Power of Truth or Godhead within. "A man is but the product of his thoughts; what he thinks that he becomes."<sup>27</sup>

The fruit of prayer, taught Gandhiji, should be looked for not in any "extraneous evidence but in the transformed conduct and character of those who have felt the real presence of God within".<sup>28</sup> "God never appears to you in person but in action."<sup>29</sup> "God to be God must rule the heart and transform it. He must express Himself in every smallest act of his votary."<sup>30</sup> "I have not seen Him, neither have I known Him. I have



made the world's faith in God my own and as my faith is ineffaceable, I regard that faith as amounting to experience."<sup>31</sup>

And since this testimony is to be found in the experience of an unbroken line of prophets and sages in all countries and climes, and since that experience can be repeated by anyone who fulfils the conditions laid down for it, it fully satisfies the test of scientific testimony. One can dismiss it as a mere "superstition" only at one's cost. "God will not be offended, but I can say from experience that he who does not pray is certainly a loser."<sup>32</sup> "In spite of despair staring me in the face on the political horizon, I have never lost my peace. . . . That peace . . . comes from prayer."<sup>33</sup> "Where there seems to be no helper and no comfort in the wide, wide world, His name inspires us with strength and puts all . . . despair to flight. The sky may be overcast . . . with clouds, but a fervent prayer to Him is enough to dispel them."<sup>34</sup> "When helpers fail and comforts flee, I experience that help arrives somehow from I know not where."<sup>35</sup>

But He is an inexorable searcher of hearts. "He knows us and our hearts better than we do ourselves. He does not take us at our word, for He knows that we often do not mean it, some knowingly and others unknowingly"<sup>36</sup> and so he does not answer "in every detail every request of ours".<sup>37</sup> He never "answers the prayers of the arrogant, nor the prayers of those who bargain with Him. . . . If you would ask Him to help you, you would go to Him in all your nakedness, approach Him without reservation, also without fear or doubts as to how He can help a fallen being like you . . . and you will find that every one of your prayers will be answered. . . . I am telling this out of my personal experience, I have gone through the purgatory."<sup>38</sup> But He comes to our rescue not on our terms but on His terms. He tests us through and through. "He is the most exacting personage in the world and the world to come. He metes out the same measure to us that we mete out to our neighbours—men and brutes."<sup>39</sup>

Does He then break His law when He answers our prayer?

"No," said Gandhiji. The question arises only when we conceive God in human terms. "I do not regard God as a person. Truth for me is God, and God's Law and God are not different things or facts, in the sense that an earthly king and his law are different. Because God is an Idea, Law Himself . . . it is impossible to conceive God as breaking the Law."<sup>40</sup> When we describe Him as a person, "we are simply using human language and we try to limit Him. Otherwise He and His Law abide everywhere and govern everything."<sup>41</sup>

That raises the issue of free will and determinism. Gandhiji admits that "the free will we enjoy is less than that of a passenger on a crowded deck."<sup>42</sup> Our past enmeshes us. But that need not lead one to fatalism. "Man is the maker of his own destiny in the sense that he has the freedom of choice as to the manner in which he uses his freedom. But he is no



controller of results.”<sup>43</sup> Action and its fruits—like everything else on the phenomenal plane—are governed by the law of causality, not the soul which is eternal and unchangeable—not being part of Nature.

The sum of all that is good is God, said Gandhiji. But for that very reason He cannot be defined or can be defined in contradictory terms only, and ultimately in negatives—“Not this”; “Not this”. This is no indication of the contradictoriness of His nature, but an indication only of His myriad-sidedness and of the limitations of speech in describing what is beyond the reach of words and even thought. In His living dialectic all contradictions are resolved and reconciled in one grand diapason of harmony—“On earth the broken arcs; in heaven a perfect round.” To sum up:

To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. . . . He transcends speech and reason. . . . He is a personal God to those who need his personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply *is* to those who have faith. He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us. . . . He is long-suffering. He is patient but He is also terrible. . . . With Him ignorance is no excuse. And withal He is ever forgiving for He always gives us the chance to repent. He is the greatest democrat the world knows, for He leaves us “unfettered” to make our own choice between evil and good. He is the greatest tyrant ever known, for He often dashes the cup from our lips and under the cover of free will leaves us a margin so wholly inadequate as to provide only mirth for Himself. . . . Therefore Hinduism calls it all His sport.<sup>44</sup>

Faith transcends reason. Full faith does not feel even the want of experience, affirmed Gandhiji. Need that detract from the validity or value of faith? Does not even a physicist or a mathematician make use of numbers that cannot be expressed in rational terms but only in symbols? Are “irrational numbers” any the less real on that account? They are indispensable tools in all physical and mathematical research. Even so is faith an essential instrument in spiritual researches.

But what about those who lack faith and, therefore, cannot pray? Gandhiji was asked. He replied: “Be humble. . . . You are not going to know the meaning of God or prayer unless you reduce yourself to a cipher.”<sup>45</sup> And the way to reduce oneself to a cipher, he said, is to lose oneself in the service of the least in His creation.

## 5

The foregoing is an outline of the “science of prayer” as propounded by Gandhiji. But he was not satisfied with pure science; it had to be related to social problems and to provide a solution for them.



The technique he used for it was that of congregational prayer. The increasing studies of the "field" in physics, biology and individual psychology, observes Gerald Heard, is tending to show more and more that the "individualistic or atomistic approach" to the question of prayer is partial and needs to be supplemented. "Human ecology is becoming a popular and important word. A religious congregation is certainly a unit in which that ecology needs to be studied." Hence the importance of "inquiring into and experimenting with the important and almost neglected problem of group psychology as a practical issue of worship and congregational unity. For that we need the study . . . of the relationships of numbers and quality, of intensity and mass."<sup>46</sup>

"Congregational prayer," said Gandhiji, "is a means for establishing the essential human unity through common worship."<sup>47</sup> It became an integral part of his technique of non-violent mass action. Since congregation consists of individuals, it goes without saying that congregational worship can have no meaning for one who has never prayed by himself. But at the same time, individual prayer must be a lame affair if it does not result in a yearning for realising unity with the mass through congregational worship. Success would ultimately depend on the purity of the leader and the faith of the audience. "I know instances in which the audience had faith and the leader was an imposter. Such cases will continue to happen. But truth like the sun shines in the midst of the darkness of untruth."<sup>48</sup>

The question before Gandhiji in Noakhali was to build up a new basis of life for those whose morale had been shattered and to provide an antidote for the fanaticism and religious bigotry which were at the root of the disturbances. Congregational public prayer of a cosmopolitan character, in which all could join, was in itself an education. Gandhiji used it to inculcate bravery, which comes from a living faith in God, upon the victims, and the lesson of tolerance, just dealing and brotherhood upon the perpetrators of the outrages.

He spoke to them of the sun of truth "which is far more potent and enduring than its physical prototype that gladdens and gives life to the earth from day to day." Truth required no embellishment. Nor did it admit of any belittling, or magnifying. That were more futile even than the pranks of children "who gloat over their apparent success in hiding the sun when they cover their eyes with the palms of their hands. People who *live* truth in every one of their acts, be it ever so small, shall never repent. It will certainly bear fruit in its own time which, however long it may seem, is still the shortest in comparison. Those who have that living faith never fear anything or anybody. Their truth is their defence and armour, their faith their impregnable shield."

He spoke to them of God's help without which the strength of the strong is found to be useless. Making the text of his discourse Watts' famous hymn "O God, Our Help in Ages Past", which Prof. Stuart



Nelson, an American Negro and member of Friends Service Unit, had, on Gandhiji's invitation, read out at the evening prayer on the 3rd December, he pointed out how the sentiment expressed in that hymn was the same as that in Surdas's well-known hymn about the allegorical story of the chief of the Elephants and his foe the crocodile. "There is in it the same reliance upon God who is the source of our strength when every earthly aid has failed us. All human power is transient. Real safety is only when we place our reliance wholly on God:

'Beneath the shadow of Thy throne  
Thy saints have dwelt secure;  
Sufficient is Thine arm alone  
And our defence is sure.'

This is the lesson which all of us in Noakhali sorely need to learn today."

On another occasion, he took up the first verse of the *Ishopanishad* which says that all that exists in the universe is pervaded by and has its being in God. Therefore, explained Gandhiji, no-one may claim anything as his own. One should first dedicate all that one has to that Universal Being and then take and use as a gift from Him just what one needs to make oneself a fit instrument of His service. One would then never covet or want to deprive anyone of his wealth, whether in the shape of life or religion. One who believed in that truth and lived up to it, would shed all fear and live in perfect peace and security. "The same lesson is inculcated in the concluding verses of the second chapter of the Gita wherein are described the characteristics of one who has attained knowledge and brought his senses completely under control. For that life has to be built on the rock of fearlessness."

Gandhiji's prayer service included verses from Muslim, Parsi and Buddhist scriptures. They had been included in the Ashram prayer at the suggestion of the respective votaries of those religions themselves. God is one and it makes no difference to Him by what name men call Him. In the prayer meeting of the 7th December, Gandhiji commended to his congregation a writing by a Muslim in which the writer had rightly contended that a man of God is never afraid to die or lose his possessions for the sake of his self-respect or religion. "God, who has given us life, has a right to take it away." That preaching was universal and applied to all, Hindus as well as Muslims. Those who had in God their sole refuge cast out all fear. Lasting peace and friendship would come only when the communities refused to surrender to any fear save the holy fear of God.

On yet another occasion, he selected the following out of a book of the sayings of Prophet Mohammad, by Abdullah Suhrawardy, the Bengal Chief Minister's father, to be read out to the gathering: "Action will be judged according to intention. No man is a true believer unless he desireth for his brother that which he desires for himself." If a man lived



according to this precept, commented Gandhiji, there would be an end to all quarrels and "we shall be able to live as good neighbours in spite of differences of opinion and religious faith".

At the prayer meeting of the 10th December, Gandhiji again made the fundamental unity of all religions the theme of his address. In every religion, he remarked, there is a common fund of spiritual experience, which applies to men all over the world. Whatever difference strikes the eye is the result of special requirements limited to particular situations in time and place. "Indeed, there are as many religions as men on earth; for, the needs of no two men are wholly alike. Nevertheless, the underlying oneness of all religions is not a thing that can be missed. A tree has a single stem but many branches and innumerable leaves. No two leaves are wholly alike. It is the same with religion."

No religion as it existed in the present-day world, he continued, was entirely free from blemish. Islam gave to the world some of the noblest characters in history but unwanted accretions had gathered in the practices of Muslims which ran counter to the fundamental teachings of Islam. Similarly, Christian nations professed to follow the Master who taught mankind to love even their enemies. But they were responsible for two major wars in a single generation. Hinduism, which was based on the doctrine of the oneness of all creation, had allowed a diabolical wrong to be perpetrated on the so-called untouchables in the name of religion. If the Hindus and Muslims of India but lived up to the tenets of their respective faiths and cast out the fear of loss of possessions and life from their hearts, the face of India would be changed in no time. The reformed social relationships, he again emphasised, must be based upon character built on the rock of fearlessness. There was no other way to engender mutual trust.

The prayer meeting on the 17th December was held in front of a devastated homestead. The theme of Gandhiji's address was that the everyday acts of an individual must be informed by truth and non-violence if these were to be evidenced in big things. He asked his hearers to dismiss the idea that what one man could do was not possible for everyone else if a persistent attempt was made. But in all such things it was simple wisdom to remember that it was for man to make the attempt but it was God's grace alone which could bless it with success.

On still another occasion he pointed out that true bravery is not a thing that can be cultivated by imitation or by mechanically following a set formula, but by performing one's own *dharma* or duty; in other words, by listening to and doing what appeals to one's conscience. But how is one to know whether what one fancies to be the voice of one's conscience is not the voice of Satan? The criterion, said Gandhiji, is that it must conform to the message of the learned and the practice of the good, who have attained complete freedom from hatred and attachment.



Even then one should not do a thing unless it appealed to one's heart as well as intellect.

Gandhiji once defined non-violence as "uttermost purification"—purification within and purification without. The chief duty of a servant of the villagers, he told a gathering of workers who were engaged in rehabilitation work in Noakhali, was purification. As it was, the villages today were a festering sore on the countryside. When the British first established themselves in India, their idea was to build cities to which all the rich would gravitate and help them in exploiting the country. These cities were made partially beautiful to provide all kinds of amenities to the privileged set while the millions in the villages were left rotting in helpless ignorance. Clean drinking water was nowhere available, the roads were in a disgraceful condition, the waterways were choked up, education of the villagers was neglected, their minds were steeped in darkness. Every village had more than its share of preventible diseases of all kinds. There were sharks in plenty in every village who took the opportunity to prey upon the village-folk. The purification of this dreadful disease of mind and body was a task to which workers should address themselves. India was not lacking in manpower; what was needed was collective effort, rightly directed. Bad men would not then find the environment in which they could thrive. Harmonious relations would be restored among the people when poverty and ignorance had disappeared through their cooperative effort. It was with that object that he had come to Noakhali and he did not mind laying down his life for it.

In this way, he chose day after day homely little themes, related to the everyday experience of common folk to illustrate deep spiritual truths and the power of non-violence or love. In the eyes of superficial observers, this sometimes gave to his prayer discourses the appearance of an odd jumble in which the big and the small, insignificant-looking trifles and epoch-making decisions on the burning questions of the day jostled with one another. But in his eyes that distinction between the big and the small did not exist. In chemistry, if a substance is water, every molecule must conform to the formula  $H_2O$ , or else it is not water. Similarly, in Satyagraha, every action of a Satyagrahi, whether it relates to his private or his public conduct, must ring true. Truth or Godliness must show through every act of his, however small. Conversely, argued Gandhiji, if one aspires to harness the power of Satyagraha or soul force, one must seek it, like a prospector of fissionable material, in infinitesimals. He was no impossible Mahatma, he maintained; his life was made up of a number of things which were by themselves commonplace and which even an ordinary individual could practise. Therefore, what he had achieved everybody else could, and the practice of mass non-violence, the only effective answer to the challenge of unbridled brute force, was a present possibility.



## CHAPTER V

### 'DO OR DIE' AT WORK

#### 1

FOLLOWING UPON Gandhiji's departure to Srirampur, the members of his party, with workers of Satish Chandra Das Gupta's organisation, took up their stations in different villages chosen for them in the affected area. Under the supervision of Satish Chandra Das Gupta, a camp was set up at Kazirkhil with Charu Chowdhury as the steward-in-chief, with about twenty sub-centres under Gandhiji's one-village-one-worker plan. Regular contact with the various units was maintained by means of daily courier post.

Soon after we had settled down in our respective places, we had a sharp dose of a "Do or Die" lesson from Gandhiji when, one after another, we fell ill. Butler, who in his *Erewhon* put sick men in prison and criminals in hospitals, would have found in Gandhiji a kindred spirit and an enthusiastic supporter. For, like the author of *Erewhon*, Gandhiji regarded sickness as a crime. He never excused it in himself or in others. "I have lost all self-confidence. It shows that I am not in tune with God. I am unworthy to be your guide," he told his co-detenus in the Aga Khan Palace at Poona during the "Quit India" struggle after an attack of malaria had laid him low. And he seriously proposed to them each to go his or her way since he had proved to be a "broken reed" and forfeited the moral right to their allegiance! In Noakhali before sending out the members of his party on their respective assignments, he repeated that warning: "In the army a soldier who does not take care of his feet and allows corns to form, is cashiered. Much more is expected of a soldier of non-violence."

Having on a previous occasion trekked through the villages of Bengal for over a month and sampled the wonderful element euphemistically called "water" from nearly 700 *dobas* (ponds) without a mishap, I felt rather confident about myself. By an irony of fate, I was laid up with an attack of malaria even before I had set out for my village. While I was lying in a delirium, Charu, without my knowledge, informed my sister, Sushila, and wrote to Gandhiji to send her to look after me. Gandhiji perhaps thought that I had asked for her services. The next day I received the following note in his own hand:

You are not to proceed to your village. Those who go to villages have to



go there with the determination to do or die. If they fall ill, they must get well or die there. Then alone would their going have any meaning. In practice, this means that in case of illness they must be content to do with home remedies or the therapy of nature's five elements. Sushila's medical services are not supposed to be available to the members of our party. Her services are all premortgaged to the village folk of East Bengal. She has her work cut out in her village. . . .

It won't do to live in the villages like a jinn. We must learn to live and move with the proverbial cautiousness and wisdom of a she-elephant. Then alone shall we have the fitness to live there. To live in the villages of Bengal calls for a special knack. We have all to cultivate it. You and I have to pass that test.

I managed to throw off the malaria after a couple of days and the "sentence" of virtual cancellation of my assignment in the village was commuted or perhaps only suspended! Soon after that my sister and then Kanu Gandhi had their baptism of malaria and had each in their turn a dose of the sharp medicine from Gandhiji. We soon learnt our steps and began to regard ourselves as "initiates", flattering ourselves with the hope that if we came out unscathed from the paradise of all microbes and diseases in the world that Bengal was, we might well expect to become unkillables; proof against all diseases, known and unknown!

"Come to me when you are well and I shall further explain the meaning of 'Do or Die'," wrote Gandhiji in his final note to me during my illness. Accordingly, as soon as I could leave my bed, I went to Sri-rampur. I met him some way up the road to *Rajbari*—his residence—while he was having his morning walk. A small dry *khal* spanned by a single-log *shanko* lay across his path. These bridges, "marvels of engineering skill", as Gandhiji called them, are a speciality of East Bengal, very artistic but extremely treacherous to negotiate. In the morning wetted by the night dew, they become slippery and demand no small degree of balancing skill to cross them. Gandhiji insisted on performing the feat unaided. But unable at seventy-eight to emulate the agility of a teen-ager, he was saved from falling only by supporting himself on Nirmal Bose's shoulder, who had kept himself in readiness for the emergency. A few days afterwards, we read the following in the Press:

Gandhiji is having hard practice in balancing in attempting to cross precarious village *shankos* or narrow bamboo bridges. . . . For six days he failed and had to take help of others every time. But he went on with quiet determination . . . (saying) "I must cross it alone". On the seventh day, to the surprise of many, Gandhiji succeeded in crossing that betelnut-tree pole. His daily practice repeated four times, however, continues. He would say, "I shall . . . (feel) confident . . . (only) when I shall attain perfection so that I can cross . . . (even longer) bridges of this type."<sup>1</sup>



In a heart-to-heart talk with me that day, he poured out his mind. In spite of his exhortations, the exodus of refugees from East Bengal continued. Everywhere there was a demand for more and more military and police protection. To him, on the contrary, it was clear as daylight that they must not rely at all on the police or the military for their protection if they valued independence. What was the substitute for police and military protection? He had presented to them the Ahimsa of the strong. It was a novel suggestion and it only mystified them. How could he blame them? Had he made it good in his own case? He referred to a passage from Knox's version of the *New Testament* that Mr. McInerny, the District Magistrate, had read out to him a few days back:

At that time Jesus answering his disciples, said to them: Have the faith of God. Amen, I say to you, that whosoever shall say to this mountain, Be thou removed and cast into the sea, and shall not stagger in his heart, but believe that whatsoever he saith shall be done, it shall be done unto him. Therefore I say unto you, All things, whatsoever you ask when you pray, believe that you shall receive; and they shall come unto you.

Had he that living faith and a heart that staggers not? He had come to live alone in a devastated village but had not succeeded even in completely stripping himself of all company as he would have loved to. He wanted to put his faith in God to test. Why should he be afraid of death?

"I am in the midst of a raging fire, and will not leave till it is put out," he remarked to Dr. Amiya Chakravarty of the Calcutta University, who had come to see him in connection with relief and rehabilitation work. "Life in these parts must be made livable for sorely affected men and women. The work of organisation must go on, and physical as well as moral rescue achieved."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Chakravarty asked him what should be the technique for approaching the wrong-doers so that their resistance should be dissolved. "They are not only unrepentant but defiant and even jubilant over their misdeeds."

The only way to meet their attitude, replied Gandhiji, was not to succumb to it but to live in their midst and retain one's sense of truth.

Goodness must be joined with knowledge. Mere goodness is not of much use. One must retain the fine discriminating quality which goes with spiritual courage and character. One must know, in a crucial situation, when to speak and when to be silent, when to act and when to refrain. Action and non-action in these circumstances become identical instead of being contradictory.

I am groping for light. I am surrounded by darkness—but I must act or refrain as guided by truth. I find that I have not the patience and the technique needed in these tragic circumstances—suffering and evil often overwhelm me



and I stew in my own juice. Therefore, I have told my friends that they should bear with me and work or refrain as guided by wisdom which is now utterly demanded of us. This darkness will break and if I see light even those will see it who enacted the tragedy of the recent communalism in Bengal.

The new basis of life has to be built here in the villages where Hindus and Muslims have lived and suffered together on the land of their forefathers and must live together in future. For the time being, therefore, I have become a Bengali and a Noakhali man. I have come to live in their midst and share their tasks, to cement the two together or to perish in the attempt.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Chakravarty suggested, that the reports from Gandhiji's associates who were then working separately in the different villages should be collected and collated so that fellow-workers could gain new light on the technique of non-violence of the strong that was being evolved and experimented with in East Bengal. Gandhiji replied that the time for it was not yet. They had gone to an atmosphere which was still unhelpful in the midst of a sullen population. "They are treading not a beaten track but a pathless wilderness. They do not know the language and are not familiar with local problems. I myself don't know what the next step will be and cannot guide them. Even Thakkar Bapa, a seasoned worker and utterly selfless, is working away without knowing what he is doing—a thing he has never done before in his life. But I am hopeful that order will come out of what is for us the necessary chaos. Then what you and I wish will be forthcoming, and it will be a most valuable record for future workers."

"That is what all our people feel as well as workers abroad," observed Dr. Chakravarty. "Noakhali has become a laboratory, where a crucial test is being made; the remedy will apply to situations all the world over where disputes arise between communities and nationalities and a new technique is needed for peaceful adjustment."

Gandhiji remarked that even from London he had heard to the same effect. "That makes our responsibility all the more greater, our work has to ring true." "For me," he continued, "if this thing is pulled through, that will be the crowning act of my life. I had to come to the soil and to the people of East Bengal. The first person to whom I mentioned this was Jawaharlal. Without a moment's hesitation he replied: 'Yes, your place is there. Although we need you so much here, we need you more in Noakhali.' I asked him, 'When?' 'As soon as you feel like it,' he replied. In two days I started."<sup>4</sup>

The stars were still shining in the sky and the village of Srirampur lay quiet, waiting for the new day when after the morning prayer Gandhiji settled down to work. "One could see him wrapped in white," recorded Dr. Chakravarty afterwards describing how Gandhiji spent the morning, "his forehead shining as he went on writing in the light of a hurricane lantern. After 7 a.m. he came out for his morning walk in



the village, crossing precarious bridges and grassy lanes wet with the morning dew. He greeted Muslim peasants as they proceeded to their fields and work in the farms.”<sup>5</sup>

“I am still groping,” remarked Gandhiji when I saw him a week later. In a scribbled note he added: “I see I have not the knack. I have not yet found the key to Ahimsa. Here I am out to perform a stupendous *yajna*, but my unfitness for the task is showing at every step. There can, however, be no running away. And where can I run to? Success or failure is not in our hands. It is enough if we do our part well. I am leaving no stone unturned. Ours is but to strive. In the end it will be as He wishes.”<sup>6</sup>

To another friend he remarked: “I don’t want to return from Bengal defeated. I would rather die, if need be, at the hands of an assassin. But I do not want to court it, much less do I wish it.”<sup>7</sup> And he made it clear that he expected no less from his associates. Some time later when I unwittingly ran into a nest of trouble in the course of my duty and came out of it just with my life, he wrote: “I have said from the very beginning that it is going to be a most hazardous task. A more hazardous task is not likely to fall to our lot in this life. Let us entirely resign ourselves to Him. His will be done. . . . You are not to rush into danger unnecessarily but unflinchingly to face whatever comes in the natural course. If, in this way, all of us are wiped out, I would not mind it in the least.”<sup>8</sup>

“For myself,” he added in another note, “I am putting myself more and more in God’s hands.”

## 2

The lava was still hot under the feet when we took up our respective stations in our respective villages. There were seven of us in Gandhiji’s party—Amtus Salam, a Muslim inmate of Gandhiji’s Ashram, who had become an adopted daughter to Gandhiji; Sushila Pai, a graduate of the Bombay University and one of Gandhiji’s secretarial aids; Kanu Gandhi, a grand-nephew of Gandhiji, and his wife, Abha Gandhi; Prabhudas, a young man who used to be in the party as an office assistant, and myself and my sister Dr. Sushila Nayar. We were posted in Sirandi, Karpara, Ramdevpur, Haimchar, Parkot, Bhatialpur and Changirgaon respectively. Most of these villages had been deserted completely or in part by their Hindu inhabitants. Such Hindus as had not fled had been forcibly converted. Their women folk dared not open their lips to us about the ordeal they had passed through, except in the privacy of their inner apartments. They were still afraid to put on their foreheads the auspicious vermilion mark—the special token of a Hindu married woman. On their wrists they wore no conch-shell bangles, the other auspicious symbol which is worn in Bengal by all married Hindu



women as a marriage ring is in the West. These had either been forcibly removed or broken by those who had converted them. In some cases the women had themselves removed them out of fear. Their faces were pinched and pale and there was a scared, haunted-animal look in their eyes.

The men were demoralised by fear. One of the first Hindus I met near my village told me in the midst of a Muslim company that they (the Muslims present) were their "real" saviours and protectors; the only thing that was needed to bring back security was the release and return of Mian Saheb Ghulam Sarwar—the brain behind the riot! Seen, however, a couple of hours later in the privacy of his home, he said: "What else did you expect me to say in the midst of those folk?" Afterwards, the local Muslims often cited this man's testimony along with that of two other stooges of theirs as a certificate of their own innocence. My reply used to be to tell them (without mentioning the name) what one of the three had confessed to me in private. After that, generally there was no more argument!

We lost no time in cultivating the acquaintance of the local Muslims. Gandhiji's name generally acted as "open sesame" and the fact that he stood for the reclamation of the culprits, rather than their punishment, and had openly disapproved of dependence upon the police and military for protection served in a measure to disarm open opposition, though not all suspicion. They were afraid, too, that if any mischief befell us, it might get them into trouble. That gave us a measure of protection.

There was, however, no guarantee against chance happenings, as my own experience showed. The day after I took up station in my village, I and my colleague were sitting at dusk in the open space in our *badi* for the evening prayer when we heard cries of distress coming from a Muslim *badi* in the neighbourhood. We immediately proceeded there to render help. We took a local Hindu with us to serve as a guide. On our way we passed through another Muslim *badi*. We found women and children, here, too, running indoors in a panic. We reassured them. A Muslim young man belonging to the *badi* joined us. We reached the trouble spot after wading through a *khal*, as there was no bridge. Someone in a friendly way advised us to turn back. There was no need to proceed further, he said. We afterwards learnt that it was reputed to be a bad place—a rendezvous of absconders and bad characters. Strangers were unwelcome lest they should know too much of the goings-on there. Our guide had discreetly slipped away on receiving a whispered warning. It was already dark. The whole place was astir with people moving about with torches made out of sheafs of dry palm leaves, looking for intruders. We joined in the search, but were ourselves taken for intruders though we did not know it at that time! The search over, we were about to leave when we were asked to stop. We were interrogated. We



tried to answer the questions as well as we could still suspecting nothing. Someone then came up from behind and whispered into my ear that there was "nothing to fear". It was, to us, the first indication that there was something uncanny afoot. When we reached the *khal*, which we had crossed when we entered the *badi*, an unknown Muslim with a kindly face asked us to stop. He said he would leave us there and return in a few minutes and then we could proceed along with him. From the *badi* we could hear loud voices. A hot debate seemed to be in progress but not knowing the dialect, we could guess nothing what it was all about. The Muslim friend who had promised to return in a few minutes, had really gone to clear the way for us. For, unknown to us, a party of Muslims armed with deadly weapons had issued forth from the *badi* and were blocking our way further down the road. Their attitude was menacing. A big, hefty Muslim, with long flowing hair falling on his shoulders and looking the picture of a "mad-mulla" confronted us uttering imprecations and brandishing a *lathi*. He prodded my colleague in the chest with his *lathi*. I pushed my colleague aside and planted myself in front of him. But the same Samaritan of a Muslim, who had interposed before, came forward and, with the assistance of some others, overpowered and removed the fanatic out of the way. Further down in a Muslim *badi* we were again stopped. A crowd of about 40 people from the neighbouring villages had collected there—it being a bazar day—attracted by the shouting and the noise. Here we were interrogated for nearly an hour by two or three persons in succession. One of them was a seaman and had served as a lascar. The other owned a soda-water shop in Bombay. By that time a small group of Muslims, with whom we had made friends that very morning, arrived on the scene and pressed for our release. A discussion followed between them and those who were holding us under duress. The debate swayed to and fro indecisively for nearly an hour. Sometimes it would come to a dead-stop and after a brief lull again flare up with undiminished vigour. In the meantime the inmates of the *badi*, where we had first been detained, were having a heated argument amongst themselves as to how to dispose of us. One section was for making short work of us immediately. Another section proposed that we should be trussed up and taken to a police station. A third section was for keeping us under duress in a secret place till our fate was decided. Before they could come to any conclusion, however, the group outside that was friendly to us, though smaller in number, carried the day and we were safely escorted back to our camp at about midnight.

The next morning we revisited the place of our adventure and again met our captors of the previous night. We explained to them our mission. They were full of apologies and promised to cooperate in our work. They told us that what had disarmed their suspicion ultimately was complete absence of fear or nervousness on our part under interrogation and the



straight, full and frank replies which we gave to their questions without any attempt at evasion.

Some time after, one of our interrogators who had been very rude to us on that occasion, slipped from a coconut tree while picking coconuts. His legs and body were badly lacerated and the wounds became septic. I sent my colleague, Dr. Chandrasekhar Bhowmik, who was acting as my Bengali interpreter and camp-doctor, to treat him. This man, I later learnt, had, during the disturbances, come with a *dao* to murder the good doctor. He was cured, became friends with us and gave us valuable information about the October disturbances which proved of great help to us in our work.

At the time of our arrival in our respective villages, there was a general revulsion of feeling among the Muslims against the recent happenings. There was also a nervous anxiety, especially in the beginning, to check further exodus of the Hindus, as its continuance might result in a tightening of the Government's security measures. Moreover, those who had gone away might lodge complaints against the culprits from their place of shelter and get them into trouble. If they could be persuaded to return and live in their midst, they would be safe! Reluctance on the part of the refugees to return to their homes was even made a grievance of by the local Muslims!

The older set appeared to be sincerely unhappy over the past and sometimes even recalled with tears the times when Hindus and Muslims used to live together like brothers. They blamed the "young hot-heads" and their "new-fangled doctrines", as they put it, for what had happened. Such things had never been heard of before in those parts, they said. What was the world coming to! Those who had actually taken part in the disturbances generally denied that "anything" had happened! Even lads of ten and twelve had the same uniform pattern of prevarication on their lips. It was the nearest approach to mass perjury and regimentation of a whole coming generation in the psychology of untruth. I assembled the elders of the locality where I was and explained to them the object of Gandhiji's stay in Noakhali. They promised to cooperate. A small committee was set up. It adopted a resolution condemning the recent happenings. They pledged themselves to do their utmost to get the looted properties returned and abducted women restored, to help rebuild devastated houses and get "subscriptions" forcibly realised in the name of the Muslim League refunded, and, finally, to protect with their lives, if necessary, the life, honour and religion of the members of the minority community in future.

Some time afterwards, a ruffian tried to assault a little girl in my village. She was hardly twelve or fourteen years old and was alone in her house. The culprit pretended to ask for some salt, followed her into the hut when she went inside to fetch it, and bolted the door. She threatened to call her father who was out working in the field. The ruffian



pointed a dagger at her neck. Undeterred she shouted out, the father came and the assailant bolted. The matter was reported to the committee of Muslim elders that had been set up since our arrival. They gave the offender such a beating that I had to send my doctor to attend him! The committee was also able to obtain redress in several minor cases and a couple of important ones, till the face of things changed once more and it became practically a defunct body.

We began visiting the deserted Hindu houses. They belonged to the poor, lowly folk — *chowkidars*, *malis*, washermen and their families. The children ran into their homes at the sight of strangers as we approached. Their parents told us that till a short time ago they all used to wear Muslim dress. A Maulvi used to come daily to teach them *namaz*. “We live in a state of terror,” they complained.

“Do you ever take Ramanama?”

“We dare not.”

“Not even in the privacy of your homes?”

“No. You do not know what we have been through. We have no earthly help. We are utterly helpless.”

“Then begin taking Ramanama from today, and seek the help of the helper who never deserts. Begin now — here.”

They agreed. As the singing of Ramadhun gathered volume, they became oblivious of their surroundings. A new light spread over their countenance. They had, for the fleeting moment, found the “help of the helpless”.

The next step was to gather in one place all of them from two villages and hold *harikirtan*. This proved to be a still greater success and, for the first time after the riots, the conch-shell blast was again heard in the locality. About 30 to 40 men, women, boys and girls took part. The women were afraid to cross the bazar alone and had to be provided with an escort in order to come! A picture of Gandhiji, decorated with flowers and green sprays was placed on a small table. They had even improvised an artistic little *mandap* by making a framework of jute sticks which they covered with sheets of coloured paper. In front of it they lighted incense sticks. Their only regret was that there were no sweets to be distributed as *prasad* after the ceremony. I tried to console them by saying that God’s name needed no sweetening. A good Muslim, whose acquaintance we had made on the previous day, came and joined us. He bade them to be of good cheer and told them that conversion under fear was a farce and mockery of true religion.

The *kirtan* had a strange sequel. Local Muslims took exception to it. They said, the blasts of the conch-shell had frightened their women-folk! We met them in a local tea shop round a long, grimy table, by the glimmer of a naphtha lamp which threw fitful shadows on their none too friendly faces. There were about forty of them. With the exception of a few elderly people, the rest were all young men. What did it all



portend? they asked. Nobody had dared to blow the conch-shell there before! Were the Hindus preparing to kill the Muslims in revenge?

Did they want their Hindu brethren to live in their midst on those terms, in constant fear? I asked them. "Is not the blowing of the conch-shell a regular part of the Hindu daily religious ceremonial in these parts? And if the blowing of a conch-shell can scare Muslim women, when Muslims are here in an overwhelming majority, what must be the plight of a handful of Hindus in your midst who have been through all the horrors of the riot? And yet you find fault with them for running away from their homes and not returning!"

They winced. There was really nothing wrong with the situation, the Hindus were needlessly nervous; that was all. The only person who could bring back the feeling of security and restore confidence was the Mian Saheb Ghulam Sarwar and he, alas! was in prison — an innocent victim of malice! He was the real protector of the Hindus and Muslims alike. The "Pir Saheb" (Ghulam Sarwar) had actually helped the needy Hindus and Muslims without distinction out of his own pocket and was held in high esteem by thousands of persons from Gauhati (in Assam) to Peshawar (in the N.-W. F. P.)! I told them about the report sent by the military intelligence to the Central Government at Delhi that he was the *fons et origo* of the whole trouble. But they protested that "nothing had happened" at all in that area — no murders, no arson, no looting of Hindu houses! I pointed to the entire rows of rifled and gutted shops in the bazar. They said Mian Saheb was not present at Shahpur when those things took place. It was all the work of outsiders — goondas! Where was Mian Saheb at that time? At Karpara, waiting for the severed head of Rai Saheb Rajendralal Chowdhury to be brought to him? They did not know anything about Karpara! What about the abducted girls who were still missing? It was very shameful, *if true*, but they *really* knew nothing about them!

I told them that so far as Mian Saheb's release was concerned, it was a matter for the Muslim League Ministry of Bengal to decide. But they must realise that they could not expect the refugees to return to their homes whilst they maintained that "nothing had happened". The least they must do, if they were serious about the refugees' return, was to help restore the looted properties, and the abducted girls. They said that if only the refugees returned, the properties could be returned to them, otherwise to whom were the articles to be restored? I suggested that the stolen properties might be deposited at the back of a *badi* selected for the purpose or in the mosque at the dead of night. We would afterwards go there, make an inventory and write to the owners to come and take delivery! They parried the suggestion and diverted the conversation to the "harassment" of innocent Muslims by the military and the police. I told them that the protection of innocent people was common cause between them and ourselves, but their present attitude must



change; it helped neither them nor the "Pir Saheb", whose release they desired, nor the return of the refugees to their homes. They must cleanse their hearts and be honest with themselves.

The talk continued loud and long. At one stage the youngsters standing behind us seemed to get restive and there promised to develop a rough house. In the middle of it someone got up and blew out the candles that had been lighted at the two ends of the table, leaving the shop in semi-darkness. I must say, I and my colleague did not quite like the look of it. The elders, however, pulled up the hot-heads. In the end they all agreed that the Muslims should encourage the Hindus to observe their religious practices and ceremonies without any molestation or fear, instead of taking exception to the observance. The lunar eclipse was to commence at 8.47 that night. Knowing that our orthodox host would be waiting for us and would not dine after the eclipse had commenced, we took leave of the company and returned home.

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The refugees who were repatriated to their villages were provided with a week's ration. The scene which awaited them on their return was one of indescribable desolation. The homesteads were in ruins, sometimes without even roofs, door leaves or window frames. The yards of the *badis* were littered with dirt and debris, broken earthen pots, pieces of quilt and torn dirty clothing. Heaps of coconut shells and husk, and rusty trunks that had been broken open and rifled during the disturbances lay everywhere. The backyards and environs were overgrown with rank vegetation, which in Noakhali swallows up everything. The tanks were choked with weeds, their embankments dilapidated and walks and footpaths in a sorry state as a result of long neglect and the inundations caused by the last rains. The orchards and coconut and betelnut gardens were denuded of fruit.

We had started cleaning up operations in our *badi* some time back. My companion used to sweep the yard everyday in the beginning. Then he had to go away and for several days the yard remained unswept. One morning I swept it myself. The next day the members of the *badi* got up early and swept it before me. I fell into self-complacency. After a couple of days things became just as before. It taught me a valuable lesson. I resumed the operation from the next day and when others joined up to relieve me, I moved to another part of the *badi* and cleaned it up likewise. I continued this day after day. As more people joined up, I moved further on. In a few days the whole place put on a new look. The jungle was cleared, the embankments of the tanks repaired, fresh dressing put on the footpaths, trench latrines built. Visitors from the neighbouring villages were struck by the change. They requested us to start work on the same lines in their villages, too. I told them they must come provided with implements and first work with us for a week as a token of their earnestness. This they did. At the end of the term,



we proceeded to launch a cleaning up programme in a village adjacent to ours. I had asked the people there to assemble in one place with the needed equipment and select suitable sites where the various projects were to be started. When we went there for a preliminary inspection, not only had they done all that but — thanks to the probation that some of them had under us — they had started work and even finished a good bit of it! We helped them to set up a local *panchayat* to supervise the execution of their plans and to take up other matters pertaining to their common welfare. Anyone who failed to set up a trench latrine or make proper use of it was to be fined. The fertilizer from the trench latrines was later dug up and used for raising vegetables when they were threatened by food shortage.

In this way, wherever people were willing to return to their homes, their *badis* were cleaned up and made to look spick and span by the collective voluntary labour of the local people, so that a cheerful welcome awaited them on their return home instead of the vista of devastation and ruin.

A few days after the programme in this village had been launched, the District Magistrate with the Additional District Magistrate and the Special Relief Commissioner visited my camp. On the way, they passed through this village and found it to be a different place from what they had seen on their previous visit a few weeks back. Not only the surroundings but even the inhabitants wore a different look. There was a gleam of self-confidence and hope in their eyes instead of the apathy of despair. The visitors were so impressed by the transformation that they suggested that I should extend the experiment and integrate it with their scheme of "test relief works" which they had adopted to provide relief to the destitute of both the communities in the riot-affected area. I agreed to give the experiment a trial provided it was allowed to be run entirely under our direction and control and there was no official interference. The camp provided an honorary foreman, and induced some educated young men to become voluntary labourers, to set an example to others. We succeeded in inducing the women, boys and girls, too, to come out and join in the self-help experiment. The women were afraid to stir out of their homes. We asked them to clear the jungle in their own *badis*. We provided the children with miniature baskets, which they could easily carry, and taught them to carry earth and weeds from the tanks in relays after the manner of fire-bucket drill. As a result, their output of work almost came up to the level of the adults. The rates of remuneration were annas fourteen per day for the adults, annas ten for minors (subsequently reduced to twelve annas and eight annas respectively). The foremen got one rupee per day. Some spades, baskets, brooms and *daos* were loaned by the Special Relief Commissioner.

The operation lasted from the 19th February, 1947 to 17th March,



1947, and covered four villages. It was then abruptly terminated by the rehabilitation authorities. The number of man-days of labour rose from 293 in the first week to 1,107 in the third. The work done during the period included: (1) Removal of weeds from 29 tanks, (2) repair of embankments and steps leading to the water's edge of 9 tanks, (3) erection of trench latrines and clearing the jungle in 14 *badis*, and (4) repair of 300 yards of roads and inter-connecting footways and construction of 200 yards of a jeepable road to connect two parts of a village with the District Board road. Besides this, people in one village by their voluntary labour cleaned and levelled up a *maidan* for the holding of the coming spring festival. The total number of man-days of labour put in was 2,043 representing a wage packet of Rs. 1,426-10-0.

Our foremen and voluntary labourers surrendered their earnings to the tune of ninety rupees and odd to enable us to purchase implements for ourselves at the end of the operations. They formed the nucleus of assets for a multi-purpose co-operative agricultural and village improvement society which we later set up. But for it we could not have survived the boycott of Hindu cultivators by the local Muslims a couple of months later when the situation deteriorated on Gandhiji's departure for Bihar.

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Rehabilitation had commenced late in the adjacent village of Karatkhil. To inaugurate it an inter-caste dinner was held. The authorities had appointed a Special Relief Commissioner with Magisterial powers for the distribution of free doles etc., to the refugees. He was present on the occasion. A procession of Muslims shouting Muslim League slogans passed by while the dinner was in progress. It threw the whole gathering into a panic. Someone from among the processionists had entered a *mali's* house, and beaten up the *mali's* little boy when there was no-one else in the house. The assailant could not be traced. I followed the procession for some distance and found among them several members of the old tea-shop group, with whom I had made friends. They said they intended no mischief. When I returned, the inter-caste dinner was still in progress. I asked the gathering to indicate by a show of hands how many of them had remained unnerved by the procession and the shouting of slogans etc. In reply five hands from among the men and three only among the women went up!

I felt very sad. After a night of vigil and prayer, from the next morning I began to make them recite Ramanama collectively, beginning with my own *badi*. At first I used to gather together members of each *badi* separately and explain to them the inner meaning and significance of the Name. Afterwards, they began to assemble from all the *badis* in front of their devastated temple. The gist of what I told them was that if they had a living faith in God and walked in His fear always, they would know no other fear. Fear of death turned men into cowards



and yet was there a man who being born could escape death? Conversely, was there any to whom death could come twice? What was better then—to face the ruffian's dagger like a man while defending one's honour and religion or to purchase a brief, cowardly reprieve only to die of sickness, old age and disease after prolonged agony and suffering? If they really regarded God as Father, why should they be afraid of meeting Him in answer to His call? Did they not believe that not a sparrow falls without His will? And to illustrate the remark, I told them the story, which the late Maulana Shaukat Ali used so often to relate, of a condemned prisoner in Yeravda Prison. He had murdered his wife, whom he dearly loved, in a fit of groundless jealousy and was very repentant afterwards. All through the night before his execution, he danced and sang in his cell:

“Bedeck thyself, O dapper young man,  
Prepare thyself for the journey to  
Thy beloved's place.”

The next day he mounted the gallows in an ecstasy of expectancy and fulfilment. If they really believed that God was their friend and protector, they would rejoice to meet Him and not be afraid of death. Why should they be frightened of fire-arms? Fire-arms could but deal death. But even a *lathi* blow or a brickbat could do the same. What difference did it make to the victim whether he fell to the one or the other? Supposing, I put it to them, a horde of hooligans, armed with *lathis* and daggers, came upon them while they were engaged in singing Ramadhun, and the women and children instead of collapsing under fear and running helter-skelter remained absorbed in their singing, oblivious of everything, the hooligans would feel that there was a power superior to that of arms which enabled those who possessed it to remain undismayed in the face of death. They would be non-plussed. Women were regarded, and she regarded herself, as the “weaker vessel”. That was true in the physical sense. But women had wielded the weapon of Satyagraha, or self-suffering, in their homes, as mothers, wives and sisters since the beginning of time. Men might be deluded into putting reliance on the strength of their right arm, though in practice they had seen its futility in Noakhali at least. But women had nothing else to rely upon except God. “Ramanama, therefore, must mean everything to you. If you really inscribe it in your heart so that it becomes a living presence, you will find that in future it will not be you who will tremble before the goondas but the goondas who will quail before you.”

The last words came to my lips spontaneously, without any forethought or meditation and in spite of myself almost. I confess, if I had stopped to think, I might have hesitated before uttering them.

It was no easy task in the beginning to persuade the women to come out of their seclusion or to get them to discard their veils and



stand erect in regular rows, facing the men and sing Ramadhun to the accompaniment of *tal*, in a loud voice, without embarrassment, hesitation or fear. But gradually they got used to it. At first men used to lead and the women followed. After some time the arrangement was reversed. Women led and the men followed.

The routine which we followed was to have Ramadhun in our *badi* early in the morning as soon as the gong was beaten. The signal was picked up by the adjoining village where a small party of us proceeded next, singing Ramadhun to the accompaniment of *tal* all the way. As soon as we reached there, the gong would be beaten again and that served as a signal for the third village, which we visited next, with more members added to our party. The return journey was utilised to teach little boys and girls some songs and *mantras* which later formed part of their regular prayer at all functions. After Ramadhun they all dispersed and engaged in scavenging and sanitation work in their respective *badis*, which was an essential part of our programme. I and my doctor colleague would then visit the sick and the ailing. Incidentally, this enabled us to teach the boys and girls accompanying us a little nursing, care of the sick and elementary rules of health and hygiene. In the afternoon we all assembled in one place and had an hour's *takli upasana* (spinning as a sacrament) in perfect silence. Next to Ramanama this helped in the psychological rehabilitation of the riot-affected people most. In fact without this the other would have been incomplete. We could not go on preaching sermons on fearlessness to the fear-stricken refugees for ever nor could we have made them stand on moral tip-toe, as it were, all the time. But engaging in a basic, creative activity together served as a charm against depression and fear. It took their minds off their misfortune and removed the feeling of frustration by providing an outlet for their striving for self-help. But more about it later.

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Little occasions now and then provided miniature rehearsals in test of faith. Women and even our little boys and girls took pledges that they would shed the fear of death and go unaccompanied on a dark night to any place that they might be ordered to, without a lantern. I sent two little girls from my *badi* to the village adjoining ours. They were given an electric torch which, however, they were not to use unless they were really afraid. I sent a co-worker after them to keep watch unobserved. The path lay through a thick betel-nut garden where even at midday the sun hardly penetrated. On the previous day a woman in that village had been so scared by the shouting of a Muslim procession that she ran to a neighbouring *badi* to seek shelter and at night ran a high temperature as a result of her fright. The girls visited her and put heart into her. She accompanied them back to our place and told us that she, too, had taken the pledge to shed fear and would never again



be afraid as she was on the previous day. It was half past ten at night. I asked the girls to escort her back. But she insisted on returning alone and without a lantern.

Some time afterwards, a deputation came from the village of Sindurpur, where a dacoity had taken place on the previous day. They were afraid to return to their village by themselves as it was getting dark. They wanted an escort. "All right, you shall have an escort." Two little girls from our *badi* offered to accompany them. They did not ask for an escort after that and went back alone.

An elderly widowed sister of our *badi*, who was known as *thakurma* (grandmother) caused a sensation even among the Muslims by going alone after dusk to Kafilatali, which was considered to be very unsafe. "But, O! she is from Bhatialpur — that explains," the Muslims remarked among themselves as she passed through the village of Karpara, where the grim tragedy of Rai Saheb Rajendralal Chowdhury's family had occurred a few months back. "No, no, she is a Nepali," exclaimed some others because of her somewhat Nepalese features. "You will all become Nepalese if you come and stay in our *badi* for a fortnight," she answered back. She came to be known amongst us thereafter as Nepali-Ma, i.e., the Nepalese mother.

On another occasion when I went to see a riot leader, who was absconding and spreading terror in his neighbourhood by organising gangs from his hiding so that men turned pale and trembled at his name, two little girls from the village of Mogarpara on learning that I had gone to meet him asked their way to his *badi* and walked in while we were talking. The maternal uncle of one of them had been murdered by this gang leader during the Gopairbag massacre. She had taken the pledge that she would one day go and tell him to his face that he could cut her throat as he had her uncle's but she would not tremble before him or run away.

"Do you know this place?" I asked them.

"Yes, Quasim's *badi*."

"Do you know Quasim? Have you ever seen him?"

"No."

"Well, then here he is," I said, pointing to the person sitting next to me. "Are you now satisfied that he is just a human being like you and me and not a monster with a tail and horns?"

They laughed, Quasim joining.

"And do you know these girls?" I asked Quasim.

"No."

"Well, the uncle of one of them," I said pointing to the elder of the two, "was among those who were murdered during the Gopairbag massacre. She has come to tell you that you may cut her throat; she would neither tremble before you nor run away."



The little girl nodded her head as I spoke these words and Quasim laughed an uneasy, dry laugh.

Several months later, in May, 1947, there were a series of dacoities by one of the gangs organised by this man. Finally they came to Karatkhil, denuded a deserted *badi* of all the ripe coconuts on the trees and held a picnic on unripe ones, leaving behind a trenchful of shells. Our reply was to organise night watches. I gathered together all the men, women and children of Karatkhil in front of their ruined temple where they daily held Ramadhun. "Now tell me how many from among you are prepared to take part in the night watch?" Almost all the women raised their hands. Three from among the men abstained. I suggested, and my suggestion was acclaimed with loud laughter, that those who were not prepared or were unwilling to join in the night watch should take charge of the children and other household duties and set free the women-folk for the night watch. I then asked the women if they were ready to set out on their night rounds.

"Yes, but in your company," they replied.

"Now, that is not fair. You said you had faith in God."

"Yes, we have faith God will give you the strength. You won't desert us."

"I now know what sort of faith you have in me from the demonstration you have given of your faith in God. How can I guarantee the protection of anybody's life when I cannot protect even my own? The only ingenuity I possess is that I have faith that if death comes in the performance of our duty, it is the best thing for us. Even that faith has yet to be tested. Now tell me, after what I have told you—and you must take me on my word if you have faith in me—how many of you are prepared to come without me?"

In reply one after another the raised hands began to drop till only seven remained. "To tell you the truth," said one of them, "we are not afraid of death but of being dishonoured." I told them that no-one could dishonour a woman who was not afraid to die. They agreed this was so. I selected one out of seven and told her to go to the adjoining village alone. She hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath and with a *Hey Bhagavan* (O! God) set forth with clenched fists in the darkness and the mud. One after another, the rest of the seven, followed suit. Thereafter they regularly joined in the night watches and I do not remember a single occasion when I knocked at the door of anyone of them whether in the small hours or in the long hours of the night and they hesitated or hung back.

The finale came not long afterwards. One day while one of them was alone in her betel-nut garden, a notorious bad character of the locality surprised her there and gave indications of evil intentions. Thereupon she ran into her house and told her father. When the report reached me, I sent word to the ruffian, with whom I had to



deal before in connection with some other offences, that unless he made full and speedy amends, the matter would have to be reported to the district authorities. He offered to apologise to me. I told him that if he was sincere, he ought to give satisfaction to the complainant. Since his was an offence against a woman, he must appear before a court composed of women and take the verdict at their hands. At the same time the matter was reported to the local union board president's *panchayat*. They fixed the hearing at 4 p.m. The time for the women's court was 2 p.m. There is a joke current in Noakhali that in the Noakhali space-time, clocks have only three hours, viz., *sakal*, *dupur* and *bikal* (morning, noon and evening). So both the appointments were reduced to the common denominator (evening) and both the bodies met at 6 p.m. The meeting of the women's court was held first.

It was a great day. For the first time in the history of the locality a ruffian was going to appear before a court composed of women alone. Coming after the "Direct Action" of August, 1946, it seemed almost incredible. In spite of deep mud, as a result of the last night's heavy rain, and inundated *khals*, over one hundred women and girls came from four neighbouring villages, some of them after wading through waist-deep water. No men were allowed to be present at the women's court. I and my Bengali interpreter were allowed to be there by grace. The culprit had promised to make a clean breast of the matter and ask to be forgiven. But at the last moment his courage failed him and he began to waver and quibble. I then left the meeting leaving him to be tackled by the women. They succeeded in putting the fear of God into him. Within fifteen minutes he had made a full, clean confession addressing the complainant as "mother", whose forgiveness he asked, and offered to take any punishment that might be awarded to him. In view of his antecedents some women were sceptical of his repentance and wanted an "exemplary" punishment to be given to him, but they ultimately decided to leave him to the judgment of the Muslim *panchayat*. The latter insisted that he should, among other things, be punished by shoe-beating as a deterrent, but on the recommendation of the women, in consideration of his voluntary confession and surrender, this was changed into execution of a bond of Rs. 100 for good behaviour in future and a public apology to the woman complainant, accompanied by the rubbing of his nose on the ground as a mark of repentance according to the local practice. This was done there and then.

The women were satisfied and began to evince almost a motherly interest in the reform of the accused. They told him that if he asked forgiveness of God from his heart as he had asked forgiveness of them, God would surely help him to reform his character and keep to the right path.



There was no major incident of that character in our four villages after that. This is, however, to go ahead of the story.

\* \* \*

The foregoing with variations may be taken as the basic pattern of activity pursued in all the Gandhi Camps in Noakhali under Gandhiji's guidance, direction and control. Each camp had in addition, developed activities and special characteristics of its own according to local circumstances, the individuality of the worker in charge of the centre, and the nature of the human material with which he or she had to deal.

We were all of us men and women of ordinary clay—very crude and imperfect instruments for the unique experiment which Gandhiji had launched in the application of the power of non-violence or soul force to an unprecedented situation. Our main asset was our deep love and loyalty to him personally and faith in his ideals. We were lacking in his power of penance, the power that ceaseless sustained practice of the five cardinal spiritual disciplines gives. All we could claim for ourselves was that we were well aware of our shortcomings and were sincerely trying in soldierly obedience to carry out his instructions in letter and spirit to the best of our abilities. Even so some of the results obtained were astounding and provided enough experience of what can be achieved when even a small modicum of the great principle which he taught is realised in practice. While he was in the flesh, he served as the central dynamo which made all the machines run by the spiritual power he generated. Now that spiritual power is the legacy of all those who have faith and inner urge to strive in the way indicated by him.

### 3

Two miles to the south-east of Gandhiji's camp at Srirampur was Changirgaon. It was here that my sister Dr. Sushila was posted. Like most of her companions, she stayed as a guest with a riot-affected family. She reached her village on 23rd November accompanied by a Bengali co-worker. The rest of the story is best told in the following entries in her log-book slightly edited and abridged :

“The boat stopped about one and a half miles away. I walked ahead with a lad of the *badi* where I was to put up. The lad told me his uncle . . . still lived at Ramgunj as he was being threatened with death if he returned. . . . A few Hindus and one or two Muslims came and talked to me. The Hindus said that they were attacked on Sunday, the 13th October, at 12 noon, by a mob of 200 to 250 Muslims armed with deadly weapons. . . . About 700 maunds of paddy . . . was . . . burnt. An old man from the house . . . begged the mob not to burn the paddy but to take it away and give it to their own people. In reply he got a *lathi* blow on his back. . . . 1,500 maunds of paddy was burnt in the village. . . . I saw the remains of burnt paddy and burnt houses.



. . . All the temples had been destroyed and conch-shell bangles and the vermilion mark on the persons of the women removed. The men had to say *namaz*. They were all still very much frightened. . . .”

24th November, 1946

“We met some Muslims. They said they wanted peace. What had happened was the work of some miscreants. . . . The village people had no hand in the disturbances. I asked them if they had converted the people to Islam. They said, ‘Yes, but not forcibly.’ At this the women of the house came out and an old lady cried out with tears in her eyes: ‘Did you not break our *shankas* (conch-shell bangles), remove our *sindur* (vermilion) and destroy the images of our gods? My heart cries out to God against your misdeeds’. . . . I told the Muslim friends that it was wrong to call such conversions voluntary. . . . The Muslims agreed that wrong had been done. . . . I was told afterwards that most of the Muslims who had talked to us were bad characters.”

25th November, 1946

“A., an old man with a white beard, was a good man. I was told he had saved a family in his neighbourhood. . . . He came to see me with a few Muslims. They all said they wanted the refugees to return. I explained to them Gandhiji’s idea . . . and asked A. if he was prepared to give the necessary guarantee. He said he would bring other Muslims . . . to talk with me. After some time about 50 Muslims came. . . . They all said they wanted peace. . . . What had happened was bad. . . . It would not happen again. I told them that if there was a real change of heart, they should see that stolen property was returned and the goondas brought to book. There was no clear reply to this. In regard to furnishing a guarantee for the safety of the returning refugees, the Muslims held a separate consultation and produced six names . . . asking for the names of six Hindus in return. Hindu names were supplied. In the meantime I had gone to see a patient. When I returned, the list of 12 names was shown to me. I was told that 4 Muslims out of the 6 had been ring-leaders during the disturbances. . . .

“When I went to see Bapu in the afternoon he was observing silence. He scribbled out that until the guilty men made a clean confession and pledged themselves never to do such things again, they should not be taken on the committee. It was agreed that the committee was to come to see Bapu at Srirampur at 1 p.m. the next day.”

26th November, 1946

“Hurried to Srirampur so as to reach there while the Changirgaon Peace Committee members were still there. But they did not turn up.”

27th November, 1946

“Went to Srirampur in the morning to see some patients whom Bapu wanted me to see. . . . Returned to Changirgaon at 4 p.m.



Visited some . . . Hindu houses. These had escaped arson but the dwellers had been looted and forcibly converted. They said they were quite helpless. What could they do in the face of such numbers? The women and children had fled into the jungle and hidden for two days. We explained to them that one who had shed the fear of death did not care for the odds against him or her. He or she would resist evil, looking to none but God for help. Gandhiji had told us how God came to the help of Sita and Draupadi. They all said they would not be afraid in future."

28th November, 1946

"The women visited me the next day. They dared not stir out of their homes before this.

"On inquiry as to why the Peace Committee people had not gone to Gandhiji as arranged, I was told that they were still consulting among themselves and with the Union Peace Committee. One of the suspected Muslims asked me whether those who confessed their guilt would be arrested. I told them we would not take any part in getting them arrested. . . . More than that we could not say.

"Saw some patients. At 9.30 a.m. went to the village of Masimpur with B. (a Muslim) who had come to take me to his home. He was an intelligent man and seemed to know a lot about the politics of the day. . . . He agreed that fighting between Hindus and Muslims was no solution. He said he had saved the lives of some Hindus in his place. I asked him if it was before or after conversion. He said they had to be converted so that their lives might be saved. I asked him if I, too, would have to change my religion if there was a disturbance again. He said, 'No, you are different.' I tried to impress upon him that I was not different from the rest; the rule that applied to me should apply to others also.

"B. took me to a Hindu *badi*. . . . Only one Hindu family was there, all the rest had fled. One woman was laid up with fever. She and another woman clung to me and wanted to know what they should do. I told them, if they could muster up sufficient courage, they should stay there, else they should go away. I spoke to the Muslims sitting in the courtyard. They all assured me the family was 'quite safe' in their midst.

"One man on the road told B. to take me to the house of another patient who was very seriously ill. To get to the patient's house, we had to proceed by boat for a short distance. As I got into the boat, an old man came rushing. He wanted to talk to me. I was told he was an influential man in the village. He said, what had happened was very bad but it was the will of God. I told him it was wrong to shirk responsibility for evil deeds by putting it on God. He said how else could one explain the death and looting of big zamindars. They could have protected themselves, but God had willed it otherwise. I told him they



could not protect themselves because the police had failed to do their duty. Just then a child came running. My colleague and Bengali interpreter Upen Babu said: 'Supposing this child falls into the water, will you jump in to rescue it or stand still and say it is the will of God?' He replied: 'Of course we must pull him out.' 'Then you must try to resist evil. If you fail in spite of persistent effort, then and then only can you call it the will of God,' rejoined my colleague. The old man agreed.

"On reaching the house of the patient, I found a young man lying on the floor in rags. He had been having continuous fever for 13 days. He was semi-delirious, unable to speak and had difficulty in swallowing. . . . I asked for a spoon to examine his tongue. A beautiful silver spoon was brought. I wondered from where it could have come! After examining the patient and giving instructions with regard to nursing etc., I returned to Changirgaon.

"On our way to this patient's house we had to pass through a Muslim house, where I was shown a young boy of about 15. They said he belonged to a Hindu family. They had fled to Calcutta. He had returned all alone one or two days back. I asked him if he was a Hindu or a Muslim. He did not reply. The Muslims sitting around him said he was a Hindu. Then the boy also said he was a Hindu. I asked him whether he had been converted. Again he did not reply. Others said 'Yes'. I asked his Muslim name. He said he had forgotten it. I asked him to come and see me. A. said he would bring him the next day but never did. The Muslims assured me that they were the boy's friends. But I doubted whether all was well there.

"I returned home after 2. There was a note from Bapu asking me to come over to Srirampur. . . . I left for Srirampur at 3.45 p.m. On the way I saw a Muslim wailing on the road. I asked him what had happened. He said he had received news that his son had been stabbed in Calcutta."

29th November, 1946

"While returning from Srirampur to Changirgaon, my legs felt heavy. I took my temperature on reaching home. It was 101° and soon rose to nearly 104°. It was a strange experience to be sick in bed in a strange place far away from friends and relatives and with no medical or nursing help near by. I asked my compounder to give me quinine injections. I was on my legs again in three or four days."

30th November, 1946

"Saw about 25 patients in the morning. A. came from Narayanpur. I received a note from Bapu. After my meal I went to Srirampur. A. came with us. He said he had resisted the Muslim aggressors, but in vain. He was 'very sorry' for what had happened. But the Muslim League was not to blame. It was the work of goondas. I explained to him that good Muslims could neutralise the goondas."



1st December, 1946

"In the morning saw patients at Srirampur. Returned to Changirgaon at 11 a.m. Again I felt heavy in the legs. The fever was coming. I was stopped on the way by an old Muslim lady. She wanted to know why peace had left the country and how it could return. I told her that Muslims in Noakhali had lost their heads. A small crowd of Muslims had collected in the meantime. They agreed that some Muslims had gone mad. But it would never happen again. Further on, I was stopped by another Muslim, a schoolmaster. He said he had been to jail in connection with the Khilafat movement and used to be a Congressman. He was a Muslim Leaguer now. . . . He blamed the Hindus for their cowardice in not returning to their homes. I explained to him the reasons for their fear and distrust and told him to induce the Muslims to help remove the genuine fear of the Hindus."

2nd to 19th December, 1946

"From 1st to 5th December was down with fever and unable to go out. But saw patients who came to me at my residence.

"Two men, one Hindu and one Muslim, from Masimpur came to see me on the 4th. An uncle and nephew, both Hindus, had started for Rajshahi (North Bengal) two days earlier. They were accompanied by two Muslims, who also wanted to proceed to Rajshahi. The understanding was that they would protect the Hindus if the Muslims attacked them and *vice versa*. There were two Muslim boatmen. They started at about 10 p.m., being advised by some local Muslims not to start before night. At 11 p.m. they were attacked by about 25 Muslims wearing masks. The uncle was beaten and robbed of Rs. 325. One boatman put up a fight. He, too, was beaten. The miscreants took away all the luggage, including two boxes of the Muslim travellers.

"I sent for the uncle. He would not report to the police. He said he had lost his money; now he would lose his life, too. I tried my best to persuade him. At last he said he would do so the next morning. But I learnt later that he went away to Rajshahi instead. . . . I was told privately that the son of the old man who had met me when I went to Masimpur and had talked about all the trouble being due to the will of God was in the gang that had attacked the boat.

"On the 8th December, while I was coming to Changirgaon, I met a Maulvi from Srirampur. He said when the hooligans came they (the local people) were all taken aback and did not know what to do. Now they were wiser and such occurrences would never happen again. I talked to him and explained the duty of good Muslims. He took me inside his house and introduced me to the women-folk. He seemed a good man from his talk and appearance. Later he went to see Gandhiji with me and said he would call a meeting of all the Muslims from the surrounding villages and invite Gandhiji to it. A day was fixed. But



nothing came of it. I heard later that he was an absconder with grave charges against him and had absconded again.

"I visited the villages of Harischar, Narayanpur, Laotoli and Mandartoli. At Harischar there was an incident on the 12th December. Two women and two boys were sleeping in a Harijan house, which is the only Hindu house in the locality. At about midnight some Muslims tried to open the window and get in. The women inside raised a hue and cry and the intruders ran away. . . . I was told that he (leader of the gang) was identified. The Muslims of Harischar gave him 100 strokes with the shoe as punishment and fined him one hundred rupees. The Hindu family had not been troubled again.

"In the village of Changirgaon, my host's paddy was stolen. A. went round, found out the thief and admonished him. I understand that my host will be compensated. The local Muslims have fined the paddy thief Rs. 60.

"The following is the account of the families that have returned to north Changirgaon, where I am staying. Out of those who are still away, a large number have gone out of Noakhali and will, therefore, take longer to return :

Total number of families	76
Those who never left	19
Those who have returned	22
Those who are still to return	35
Of these: At Calcutta	13
Tipperah	9
Madhupur	1
Chandipur	12

Those at Chandipur and Madhupur are returning soon. The village schoolmaster has promised to start the school from the 1st January.

"On the 19th December, a Harijan of Madartoli came to Changirgaon and requested us to visit his village. . . . On 20th October, 1946, a Muslim mob went there in force and gave an ultimatum to the Hindus that they would all have to accept Islam and eat beef. At this, practically all of them ran away to Faridganj leaving an old man behind to look after their houses. Next day a gang of about 200 men came, looted the houses and then set fire to them. . . .

"We went to Madartoli and saw some sick people. A respectable looking Muslim came and talked to us. He said that what had taken place was very bad indeed. But they would see that such things never happened again. . . .

"We left Madartoli at 3. On our way back we visited the house of a zamindar. . . . Here we met three Muslims. . . . They unequivocally condemned the doings of the Muslim hooligans. A Muslim said, he had hidden the golden vessels and jewellery of the zamindar in his



own house and returned it to the owners. The story was corroborated. . . . We were told that the zamindar's family had fled, but the house was protected by the Muslim tenants of the zamindar. They put up a fight for three days but were ultimately overpowered. . . . Several of them received injuries but no-one was killed.

"On our way to Madartoli we met an old Muslim who said Hindus and Muslims must live as friends. . . . A little further on we met two young Muslims. They were rather rude, wanted to know where we were going. My Bengali colleague told them we were going to Madartoli. Then they wanted to know why we were going there. My colleague answered, 'to see things for ourselves.' What did we want to see? I was annoyed and replied, 'The marks of your kindness.' They said there was nothing to see, they had seen nothing. . . .

"On our way back a Muslim member of the union board called us and took us to his house to see a case of what he thought was pneumonia. We went and saw two cases. He was full of praise for Gandhiji's mission. I told him that one child he had shown me required treatment for at least 3 months. He wanted to know if I would be here for 3 months. I said I did not know. . . . I would go as soon as peace was established. Peace was sure to be established very soon, he said."

\* \* \*

Thakkar Bapa, the champion of "lost causes", was an institution by himself. He had accompanied Gandhiji to Noakhali and set up his camp at Haimchar, in the heart of the Harijan area in Charmandal. About the same age as Gandhiji, like Gandhiji he seemed to grow younger with years. Unremitting toil in the service of humanity was the breath of his nostrils. His simple habits, poise and dignity and force of character made a deep impression on the Muslim elders of the locality, while his level-headedness and passion for precision — the fruit of his probationership in the Servants of India Society — won him the esteem of the Government officials who soon learnt to respect his formidable array of facts and figures. His diary of 27th November provides an interesting sidelight on his method of work:

In my post-prayer speeches in the evening from 21st onwards, I have been dwelling upon the necessity of the people . . . removing their constant fear of the *badmashes* to whose intimidation they were subjected daily . . . . Though over 300 houses were looted and burnt and the names of local goondas are known to all concerned, not a single *ejahar* has been filed up to date in Lakshmipur police station due to the fear complex. . . . The number of Scheduled Caste families is nearly 400 and of Muslims only 100, the latter include a number of hooligans who have made fortunes out of the loot. . . . It is only today that about 3 or 4 persons have gone to Lakshmipur to file their complaints. . . .

I have collected figures for 352 properties looted and burnt. Their value works out to Rs. 545,774.



I am informed that the Superintendent of Police has issued a circular to the *thanas* that, as the Noakhali jail is full, no further arrests should take place. If this rumour is correct and if no local goondas are arrested, there will be more cases of arson and perhaps loot, if not something worse.

I have camped here without the help of any armed police or military and will continue to do so. The people here are asking for squads of military, but I have asked them not to press for the same and to stand on their own legs by shedding their fear. It was only last night that they could gather courage to have a large *bhajan*-singing party in front of my camp unprotected by police.

Thakkar Bapa remained at his post throughout Gandhiji's stay in Noakhali and for some time after. When his institutional obligations called him back to Delhi, he continued to serve the cause of Noakhali from there with the same zeal and devotion.

Sushila Pai's camp was set up at Karpara, almost under the shadow of Rai Saheb Rajendralal's devastated house with its ghastly associations. It became a rallying centre especially for the women. She set up as a schoolmistress, held prayer meetings and gatherings of women and young girls in her area daily to overcome their fear. As a result of her initiative, the local school that had closed down during the disturbances was restarted. She also succeeded in getting the local weekly bazar reopened. To encourage others, she set up a stall herself. She came to be loved and respected not only by the Hindus but even the Muslims who came to her for help and advice and even asked her to mediate in their disputes.

Kanu Gandhi with his flair for organisation, constructive work and cultural activities, and his wife Abha Gandhi—herself a daughter of Bengal—with her natural artistic talent, succeeded to a large extent in breaking down the barriers between Hindus and Muslims and uniting them in a bond of common fellowship in their respective centres.

Sucheta Kripalani put to use her talent for planning to relieve the destitution around her. Courageous as a lioness, she made herself feared, respected—and detested like her husband, the redoubtable Acharya Kripalani—by the toughs of the locality as no-one else perhaps except Col. Jiwan Singh of the Indian National Army, who with his white beard and beturbaned towering figure roamed over the troubled area of Raipur like a Gulliver among Lilliputians!

Last but not least among the band of workers working in Noakhali was Sadhan Bose. He distinguished himself by his gentleness, renunciation and purity. His devout religious nature particularly fitted him for work of organisation among women. It became an outstanding feature of his centre. He refused to come out of Noakhali even after Gandhiji's death and died at his post six years later, fully living up to Gandhiji's *mantra* of "Do or Die".

The workers helped to create an atmosphere of courage, self-reliance



and hope in and around their respective camps, and enabled a beginning to be made in the rehabilitation of the riot-victims in their original homes in spite of the Bengal Government's halting policy, the latent hostility of the local Muslims and the unsatisfactory attitude of the Muslim League. But they were few and scattered over widely separated places and the tide was running fast against them. The overall picture in Noakhali continued to be gloomy.



## CHAPTER VI

### WRESTLE WITH DARKNESS

#### 1

THE NEWLY-BORN plan of Government-sponsored Peace Committees proved to be ill-fated. Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Minister, left for Calcutta on the 27th November, promising to return "after four days". It had been stipulated that one of the Parliamentary Secretaries with full powers would continue to stay in Noakhali and act for the Minister during his absence. But he, too, left with the Minister owing to some "affliction of the eyes". Neither of them returned. After that things began to go awry.

The Peace Committees that had been formed continued to function in form and some useful work was done in the beginning. At one stage, when the impression had got round that the Bengal Government meant business, there was even a scramble on the part of those who were implicated in the disturbances to get into the Peace Committees as a sort of sanctuary from justice. But their interest waned when presently they found that the Government had no such intention. No action was taken by the authorities when a Peace Committee submitted a unanimous list of undesirable characters that needed to be rounded up. *Thana* officers refused to record first information reports. In one *thana* out of 1,100 statements, that had been filed, 150 only were reported to have actually been recorded in the *thana* register. In another place, whenever a complaint was lodged, the *thana* officer passed on the information to the local Muslim League organisation, from where, within a few hours, it reached the person or persons complained against, exposing the complainants to threats of vendetta and reprisals.

Things were not easy for private relief agencies. To mention only one instance, on the 26th November, Mrs. Ashoka Gupta, a social worker of All-India Women's Conference and wife of an Indian civil servant in the service of the Bengal Government, while proceeding into the interior for relief work under military escort with 21 lady volunteers and 4 men volunteers, was stopped by a party which included the Labour Minister himself, his Parliamentary Secretary and a local Muslim member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. The Parliamentary Secretary seemed to be under the impression that the women workers could have a military escort to accompany them but could not take men volunteers with them. He and the member of the Legislative Assembly



even tried to browbeat the military escort accompanying the lady volunteers!

On the 3rd December, after waiting in vain for the return of the Minister for Labour or the Parliamentary Secretary, Gandhiji addressed a letter to the Chief Minister of Bengal, drawing his attention to the growing deterioration in the situation:

Somehow or other, the Committees that were being formed do not appear to be functioning properly. As yet they have failed to inspire confidence. In spite of all my efforts, the exodus continues and very few persons have returned to their villages. They say, the guilty parties are still at large, some even find a place on the Peace Committees, that sporadic cases of murder and arson still continue, that abducted women have not all been returned . . . that burnt houses are not being rebuilt and generally the atmosphere of goodwill is lacking. . . . Restrictions are being placed on volunteers irrespective of the organisation to which they belong. I can understand illegal activities being restricted, but no other restriction would be advisable.

Quoting from a letter, which he had just received, he gave details of an incident that had occurred on the 1st December, when a Muslim mob of nearly 350 had attacked a Hindu village, looting 15 houses and injuring three persons, two of them being women. "In some parts of Faridganj area," ran another report, "repatriation is still not possible and so also in some parts of Chandpur police station. . . . Economic boycott is going on throughout the sub-division. Muslim boatmen do not carry the Hindus. Hindus are not getting Muslim labourers to reap their paddy, etc. In most cases Muslims do not purchase any commodity from the Hindu shopkeepers in Chandpur sub-division. Throughout the sub-division, Hindu fishermen are not allowed to catch fish. . . . Sometimes they are beaten, sometimes their nets are . . . taken away."

"This is by no means an exhaustive catalogue," Gandhiji's letter concluded. "I do not know whether you have an adequate conception of the mischief done."

The Chief Minister's letter dated 2nd December, which crossed Gandhiji's, brought among other things the following:

I appreciate very much your desire to bring about peace between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal . . . (but) the Muslims feel that if you really wish to pursue your objective of establishing good fellowship, Bihar should be the real field. Your stay has encouraged many of your volunteers to manufacture evidence and place it before you and to carry on a persecution of the local Muslims, particularly the local Muslim League leaders which will not possibly lead to mutual confidence in the future. . . .

The military and the police have pervaded the villages and you must have heard of their excesses. Muslims have been indiscriminately arrested and assaulted, their women have been molested and outraged, their houses have been



looted and a reign of terror has been introduced. . . . All the important Muslims are being implicated through the assistance of the Hindu organisation, such as Presidents of Union Boards, Members of the District Board, Chairmen Debt Settlement Boards, Members District School Boards, Maulvis, Maulanas, teachers, headmasters, even M.L.As. all persons in fact who may be considered respectable. . . . The purpose is only too clear. Revenge through the process of law and revenge on the innocents. . . . If you really want friendliness and mutual toleration, this kind of legal persecution has to cease.

The ugly truth of the matter was that very "respectable" persons, including Maulvis, Maulanas, school teachers, headmasters, M.L.As. Presidents of Union Boards, in fact persons belonging to all these classes that might be considered respectable, as the Chief Minister had put it, had taken active part in unlawful activities before, during and after the disturbances. If the military and the police had misbehaved, the Ministry should have taken action against them; after all they were the servants of the Crown. But here was the Chief Minister finding fault with the riot-victims instead, for invoking the law against their powerful and well-placed oppressors and using it as a plea for asking Gandhiji to terminate his mission in Noakhali!

In the Chief Minister's next letter, Noakhali had completely faded out of the picture. It was devoted exclusively to reports of happenings in Bihar!

On the 25th November, in a Press conference Jinnah suggested that the authorities, both Provincial and Central, should take up immediately the question of "exchange of population", to avoid the "recurrence of incidents which had taken place where small minorities have been butchered by overwhelming majorities." Following upon it, it was noticed that the Government of Bengal began to take special measures for the settlement of the refugees from Bihar in the border districts of Bengal. Did it portend a corresponding change in the Bengal Government's policy in regard to the rehabilitation of the minority in Noakhali, too? And was the phasing out of the Bengal Minister from East Bengal an indication of that change?

On the 15th December, Manoranjan Chowdhury, a local Hindu Mahasabha leader, who was taking active part in the formation of Peace Committee under the Government plan, with Gandhiji's approval addressed a letter to Shamsuddin Ahmed:

In the meetings which we hold for organising Peace Committees, I am confronted by questions asking me to explain the drastic measures that the Bengal Government is taking to force the evacuees to go back to their villages by stopping their rations from so-called evacuee camps, even before the Government has reconstructed their houses or made their village homes habitable while the same Government is tenderly receiving the evacuees from Bihar and settling them in Bengal instead of sending them back to Bihar. . . . The Govern-



ment here in Bengal is even loath to arrest surveillees, Criminal Tribes Act suspects, and well-known criminals . . . having practically stopped all arrests after your departure; and as a result, the miscreants still terrorise the people and are continuing their lawless career as indicated by stray cases happening every day. These are questions which I am unable to answer satisfactorily. . . . This being the situation, I request you to consult your colleagues in the Ministry and the Muslim League organisation and intimate to me your considered reply as to what your exact policy is regarding the rehabilitation of evacuees coming from Bihar and those who are practically uprooted from Noakhali villages.

The note was sent with Dr. Amiya Chakravarty to be delivered personally. From Calcutta, he reported: "I must confess that the Minister was extremely cold and unresponsive if not rude. . . . Incidentally mentioned that Bengal's situation was insignificant in comparison with what was happening in Bihar. He referred to Bihar in a self-satisfied and justificatory manner. . . . There was no sense of anguish in his reference to Bihar but an expression of triumph."<sup>1</sup>

In regard to the letter which Dr. Chakravarty had brought, the Minister said that it would be discussed in a special Cabinet meeting and that a considered reply would be sent by post. For the time being all he could say was that "the Government of Bengal have not changed . . . policy that has been initiated by me as regards rehabilitation. . . . As for myself, personal and other difficulties stood in the way of my going back to Noakhali, I cannot tell the exact date when I can go to Noakhali."<sup>2</sup>

Replying to the Chief Minister's letter of 2nd December, and the one following it, Gandhiji wrote on the 5th December:

I note that you have . . . repeated the advice you have given me often enough that my place is in Bihar rather than in Noakhali. . . . If I could feel that my presence was at all necessary in Bihar, I assure you that I would not need any encouragement from you to go there. . . . You will pardon me . . . for not taking your statements for gospel truth. For one thing, you have no first-hand knowledge of events. *I suggest that there should be an impartial commission, appointed with the consent of the two Governments, to go into the disturbances both in Noakhali and Bihar.* (Italics mine).

In another letter, on the 22nd December, he wrote: "I urge you to show me how my presence in Noakhali offends and ask you to instruct the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police to keep a strict watch on my movements and tell these gentlemen in what way I have been erring."

Throughout his life, it had been a source of perennial satisfaction to Gandhiji that he had generally been able to retain the affection and trust of those whose principles and policy he had had to oppose. But here that solace seemed to fail him. What distressed him particularly was the growing acerbity of the Chief Minister's letters. On the 24th



December, after much thought, deep prayer and self-introspection, he addressed a personal letter to the Chief Minister, addressing him as "My dear Shaheed" and signing it as "Yours, Bapu":

I remind you of our pleasant meeting in Faridpur when Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das was still in his physical case. If I remember rightly, you were the only one sitting in front of me spinning assiduously, though you were unable to pull an even or fine thread. And then, if I remember rightly, when I applied to you some distant adjective of affection, you corrected me by saying that you felt as son to me. I would like to think still that you are the same Shaheed and to feel proud that my son has become Chief Minister of Bengal. . . .

I wish you had Bengal on the brain rather than Bihar. Assume the truth of all that has been said in the Bihar Provincial Muslim League's reports. . . . You do not want to satisfy yourself by thanking God for Bengal being as bad as Bihar. . . . You seem to believe the stories of Bihar cruelties with which you have been regaled. . . . I frankly confess to you that these reports do not carry conviction to me. If even 50 per cent. of the stories are true, life would become a burden for me. . . . You should know that though here, I was able to affect events in Bihar by my putting myself on protein-and-fat-free diet and by my proposal, if things did not mend, to undertake complete fast. . . .

Though I have not come out publicly, and I hope I shall never have to do so, things in this part of Bengal are not at all rosy. Fear still dominates the refugees. Refugees ought not to be threatened with stoppage of rations. There are several other humane ways of inducing them to return to their homes. If you really want them to do so, you ought to supply them with proper food, warm clothing and decent habitation. . . . If you cannot do so, because of want of funds or sufficient workers, it would be quite proper and honourable to make that announcement and let philanthropists do the needful. There are workers enough in the country who would respond to the call. You, single-handed, will not be able to cope with the work. And if you really mean the thing, you ought to send a responsible Minister whose sole task would be to attend to this public duty. In this you will find in me a ready, willing, and, I hope, efficient helper.

But it was no use. It was to a mind hardened by prejudice and deep suspicion that his words were addressed. Bihar had queered the pitch. But, as the poet has sung, "There shall never be one lost good". Those who were in a position to follow on the spot the Bengal Premier's reaction afterwards testified that it was this act of faith on Gandhiji's part that marked the beginning of a change in Shaheed, which to everybody's amazement resulted in his transformation eight months later. (See Chapter XVI, Vol. III).

What was Gandhiji to do? It was certainly true that what had happened in Bihar was brutal enough and deserved the severest condemnation. But he argued with himself that he could exercise his personal influence in Bihar even from a distance; the Bihar Ministers were his friends, his word carried weight with them. His partial fast and



notice of a complete one had already had a magical effect. There was nothing more he could do by going there. But he could not use that weapon in the case of Noakhali, where the Muslim League organisation and a large section of the Muslims regarded him as an enemy of Islam. He had not still won their confidence. If in order to placate them he went to Bihar against his own better judgment and in consequence the situation in Noakhali deteriorated, it would have a very detrimental effect on Bihar and jeopardise his mission there in advance. It might even seriously imperil the safety of Bihar Muslims. On the other hand, if he succeeded in clearing up the mess in Noakhali, it would automatically improve the situation in Bihar. The malady which afflicted both Noakhali and Bihar was the same. If the cure could be made good in one place, it would automatically serve the other as well. Running from pillar to post would do no good to either. But in the prevailing vitiated atmosphere, this was not appreciated by many Muslims. They thought that he was showing more concern for the Hindus of Noakhali, who were his co-religionists, than for the Muslims of Bihar, who had suffered at the hands of the Hindus. The Chief Minister's letters echoed that sentiment. But bristling as they were with palpable exaggerations and misstatements, they served only to prejudice his case, and his shilly-shallying policy in regard to Noakhali made it impossible for Gandhiji to leave Noakhali in the interest of the Bihar Muslims themselves. The Bengal Chief Minister could have sent Gandhiji to Bihar at any time by relieving him of all anxiety on the score of Noakhali. Instead, he himself became the chief obstacle in the way of Gandhiji's going there.

One of the Parliamentary Secretaries, Hamiduddin who had gone to Noakhali with Gandhiji, went one better. He issued a Press statement from Calcutta in the course of which he said:

Mr. Gandhi does not intend to go to Bihar....Will it be wrong if one feels that Mr. Gandhi is in Noakhali only to focus attention of the world on the happenings there and to magnify the same for keeping the Bihar happenings in the background?...

Does Mr. Gandhi want to complete his organisation through the number of volunteers he has got from outside?...Mr. Gandhi may conveniently ask all the outside volunteers both male and female to quit while advising the refugees to return to their homes....

Mr. Gandhi is holding prayer meetings every day in the evening and after the prayer he sometimes delivers lectures....No more sermons or instruction seem to be necessary for the Hindus there and the Muslims never required it. When the Hindus will realise that the mischievous propaganda of their so-called friends has been the cause of (bringing upon them) more misery and discomfort, they will begin to think rightly. Free from outside propaganda, they will begin to repose confidence in their Muslim neighbours with whom they have been living peacefully for centuries.<sup>3</sup>



The Parliamentary Secretary even denied that there had been forced conversions in Noakhali. Such conversions as had taken place were, according to him, "no conversions at all"! He concluded with the advice: "Gandhiji should now leave Noakhali and utilise his valuable time and energy for something else, if not for Bihar sufferers."

This from one whom he regarded as a friend hurt Gandhiji deeply. "It staggered me," he wrote to the Parliamentary Secretary, because you had left an impression on me that you had entirely realised my sincerity and my usefulness not merely for the Hindu inhabitants of the district but equally for the Muslim inhabitants.... What has happened in the meantime to warrant... your indictment, I do not know. Why do you... advise me to leave Noakhali and to go to Bihar or somewhere else?...

Do you not think that after the exuberant regard you showed for me, I had the right to expect a friendly, personal inquiry from you to inform me of the change and the grounds for change?... You will discover in your article a valid reason for my longing to be in Noakhali in preference to Bihar.... How can I test the efficacy and soundness of Ahimsa except in a place where even the loudest protestation of trust in my professions can be so short-lived as in your case?...

I have chapter and verse to show why the Hindu refugees, who proved themselves highly deficient in personal courage, are reluctant to go back to their homes. The Peace Committees which you left in the process of formation are not in working order.... I urge you for the sake of the League Ministry, in whose efficiency and goodness I am at least as much interested as you ever can be, to believe me, I have not come to East Bengal for the purpose of finding fault with the League. I have come in order to induce it by my conduct to shed its complacency and give solid work for the sake of itself and India.<sup>4</sup>

The insinuation that he was trying to import numberless volunteers from outside in order to "complete his organisation" was the unkindest cut of all because so untrue. "I have not imported numberless volunteers," he protested. "Let me tell you that for the fulfilment of my object I do not need any volunteers here except myself. If you really think that their presence is a menace to the peace of Noakhali, the Government have but to say that they are a danger and to serve a notice on them to quit, and I assure you that without a murmur they would leave this district.... You will be astonished to learn that, dear as they are all to me... *in this mission of mine I had no need to have any associate with me, for, the quickest way to fruition required no protection or cooperation save what God sent. Such is my conception of the working of Ahimsa.* I hope that before the Government takes the adumbrated action, they will depute an officer of their choice or trust to find out from me or them the kind of work they are doing. Their life is an open book. There is nothing hidden or underground about their activities." (Italics mine).



From this undertaking he excluded only himself and "one of my company, whose name I need not disclose at this stage". She was Manu Gandhi, his grandniece, whom he had allowed, as a special case, to join him in his "Do or Die" venture in Noakhali and to remain with him when he had sent away all his other companions to their respective assignments in the riot-affected villages. (See Chapter XI).

Another grievance which the Parliamentary Secretary (and the Muslims in general) made was that Gandhiji had not contradicted the exaggerated figures of casualties in Noakhali that had appeared in the Press. These reports, they complained, were responsible for the Bihar disturbances. The assumption was not wholly correct but the Muslim sentiment was very sore over it. Gandhiji found himself in a dilemma. If he told the whole truth about Noakhali, he would have to say some outspoken things about the way the Bengal Government was carrying on in Noakhali. That would not help matters. So he chose to remain silent even at the risk of being misunderstood. He had often done that before in his life and his opponents had lived to thank him for it.<sup>5</sup>

"You say again," continued Gandhiji's letter to the Parliamentary Secretary, "'If he (Gandhi) had issued a statement about the real nature of happenings, perhaps the atmosphere would have cleared to a large extent. His silence with reference to this matter raises suspicions in the minds of many.' Why this insinuation when the fact stares you in the face that I am not in a position to speak in praise of what has been and is being done on behalf of the Bengal Government? If you will care to study the thing, you will appreciate my restraint instead of coaxing me to speak."

The letter concluded: "You should take the trouble of coming to me and passing with me half an hour or so and cross-examining me on the charges you have framed against me. This letter is not an open letter as yours is. I have written only for you, cherishing the hope that it may perhaps appeal to you as coming from a well-wisher open to conviction."

This appeal, too, like the previous one to the Chief Minister, fell on deaf ears. The excuse the Parliamentary Secretary sent back was that the Hindus of Noakhali were "not in the least enthusiastic" and objected to the "inclusion of some of our best workers" in the Peace Committees. He had, therefore, lost all hope about the Peace Committees and interest in their working.

Of a piece with it was the Chief Minister's letter dated 25th December. He was sorry, he wrote, he could not spare any Minister for Noakhali for the time being as there was "considerable amount of administrative work" to be done at Calcutta. He could "certainly . . . have no objection" to Gandhiji bringing to the notice of local officers any complaint that he received!



So there was a complete stalemate. Gandhiji was free to stew in his juice if he decided to stay on in Noakhali.

## 2

Gandhiji's suggestion of having an impartial inquiry with identical terms of reference for Noakhali and Bihar did not find favour with the League. The relations between the Congress and the Muslim League continued to deteriorate. The demoralisation of the riot-affected community of Noakhali deepened and nothing contributed to it more than the policy of the Bengal Government in respect of Noakhali.

Typical of the atmosphere in the affected villages was the experience of two social workers. On the 28th December, a worker of the Marwari Relief Society went to the village Gopinathpur, where the local people had arranged a programme of *harikirtan*. "They said they had given it up, being prevented by the local Muslims. I asked them to give the names of those who prevented them. They would not . . . saying . . . they had to pass their days in the village . . . their homes would be destroyed (if they held *harikirtan*)."<sup>6</sup> Five days later, the worker again went there: "They (the Muslims) stopped me on the way and showered abuse on me. . . . They said . . . they would beat anyone who dared to recite *harikirtan*. I said, 'I shall certainly invite them (the local Hindus) to recite the names of Rama and Krishna.' They said, 'You should not take the name of Bhagavan (Hindu name of God) in Pakistan.' . . . I had to return empty-handed."<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Vardaranjan Pillai, a registered member of the Bengal Medical Council, was engaged in medical relief work in the affected villages. On the morning of 2nd January, 1947, with a companion he left Chandpur for Gandamara village at the request of a local Muslim who had sent word that cholera had broken out there. On reaching there, the Muslim friend was not to be found, nor was there any case of cholera either:

We, therefore, decided to see some other patients and dispense medicines. The Muslim National Guard volunteers of the Muslim League volunteered to escort us. But instead of taking us to the patients, they took us to their Madrasa. We were surrounded by . . . about 100 villagers. A Hakim named Mubarak Ali cross-examined us regarding our identity and purpose. We were informed that we would not be allowed to return unless we could satisfy them as to our identity. I gave them my registered number of the Bengal Medical Council. They were not satisfied. They said they could not believe how two Hindus unarmed could come in their midst. They searched our medicine bag and instruments box, took away my pocket diary. . . . Still not satisfied they took us to . . . their local chief. We asked them to call their Union Board Presidents. . . . They refused saying . . . he was their enemy. . . . Then we asked them to call the police to



identify us. That also they refused. . . . Finally they decided that if we were sincere . . . we should go to their League Secretary at Chandpur. . . . To prove our sincerity we agreed. . . . We . . . proceeded to Chandpur with . . . two League volunteers. . . . They avoided the main roads. . . . We reached Chandpur at 6 p.m. We saw the League Secretary. . . . We questioned him regarding his authority to cross-examine us . . . . We went to the sub-divisional officer. The League volunteers disappeared and did not face the S.D.O. The S.D.O. took down our names and informed us that soon he would make an inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

Sardar Patel felt worried. In a letter to me, referring to a rather panicky telegram from Noakhali that he had received, he wrote: "It is difficult to get any information from your side. I do not know what Bapu is doing, but if the facts stated in the telegram are true, I wonder what the result of all these Herculean efforts of Bapu is. In Bihar, after the first week of trouble, when order was restored, everything has been quiet. . . . Besides all the relief work is entrusted to the Muslim League, a large number of workers having come from Aligarh, from the Frontier and the Punjab. . . . In Noakhali, it appears that the local Muslim would not agree to help unless they get orders from the League. This is a very difficult situation, and we must do something to reconcile the conflict between the two. *We must have a uniform policy in both places.*"<sup>9</sup> (Italics mine).

Thus Bihar and Noakhali continued to act and react upon each other and that in its turn had a very detrimental effect on the all-India situation. There was much dissatisfaction at the annual session of the Indian National Congress that was held in the last week of November, 1946, at the British Government's insistence upon more and more concessions being made to the Muslim League after each act of aggression on the latter's part. Sabre-rattling on one side provoked Sardar Patel into a tit-for-tat ("Sword will be met by sword"). Gandhiji did not like it. And yet what soothing balm could he offer to the sufferers or those who did not share his philosophy? The atmosphere was surcharged. The Constituent Assembly was scheduled to meet on the 9th December but the League still continued to boycott it. A rumour went forth that the Muslims in Noakhali would observe the day as a day of protest. It conjured up before the populace the vision of a repetition of the October happenings. Gandhiji was charged with the intention of secretly planning Satyagraha of an extensive character in Noakhali. It was too silly for words. But in the peculiar setting of Noakhali, any flying spark could touch off a conflagration. It was no use Gandhiji's trying to explain that by its very nature Satyagraha precluded secrecy; the sole object of his stay in Noakhali was to bring about heart-unity between the two communities. That could not be achieved by secretly planned Satyagraha.

There were letters from Muslims, and articles and comments in



the Muslim League Press to the effect that Gandhiji's continued presence in Noakhali was preventing the restoration of peace and cordial relations between the Hindus and Muslims and that his intention was to bring discredit upon the League Ministry in Bengal. This distressed Gandhiji. He was there to help the Bengal Government in restoring communal harmony. They also professed to be anxious for it. They should, therefore, have welcomed his cooperation and utilised it in establishing unity of hearts in East Bengal. His presence could cause them embarrassment only if they were insincere in their professions or doubted his sincerity. He had even told them that they could ask their Superintendent of Police to convince him of his error, if they themselves were convinced. And yet nobody had said a word!

Could he not see that when the Bengal Government professed sympathy with his mission, they were only trying to be polite; they did not mean it? He refused to take that view. He took them implicitly on their word. It was not gullibility but sincere, genuine trust—trust that begets trust. He took the risk, if there was any, with open eyes. By giving to the adversary, in all sincerity, credit which he did not always deserve, he often made him live up to his high certificate.

The technique of Satyagraha consists in purging or bringing to the surface the hidden lie in the soul. The Bengal Government had either to implement its declared policy or openly to abandon it. The Chief Minister had accused "outside agencies" of preventing the return of displaced persons to their homes and had on that score asked for their withdrawal from Noakhali. This was a fantastic perversion of logic. It was the Bengal Government's policy that constituted the real hindrance in the way of the refugees' rehabilitation in their original homes. It is true that if Gandhiji and the workers who had come with or after him to Noakhali had retired from the scene, leaving the local Hindus alone with their erstwhile oppressors, the Hindus would have been cowed into a "resigned submission", as Mr. Barrett, the Commissioner of Chittagong Division, later put it in his secret report to the Bengal Government; and Noakhali would have had the peace of the grave. That was not what Gandhiji's non-violence stood for.

He had work enough to do elsewhere, he observed in one of his prayer addresses. There was the Constituent Assembly in which his help was needed. He would have loved to spare the trouble to the leaders of coming all the way to Noakhali to consult him. But he felt convinced that the work undertaken by him in Noakhali was of the greatest importance for the whole of India. Nay, if he succeeded in his mission, it was bound to have a profound influence on the future peace of the world. Another person in his place might have been tempted to temporise and go to Bihar against his own better judgment as a sop to the Muslim League sentiment. He knew of many political workers, he said, who were guided in their steps by what other people might say or think of their



actions. But he was differently made. He, too, carefully weighed the pros and cons of an issue before he launched upon a course of action. But once the decision was taken and he was satisfied that it was correct in terms of truth and Ahimsa, he plunged headlong into it without any further thought and let his acts and honesties speak for themselves.

But here in Noakhali his acts and honesties seemed not to speak for themselves. "My knowledge of psychology tells me," he explained to one of his companions, "that if our actions or words produce upon others an effect contrary to what was intended, the cause for it must be searched for within ourselves." He declared that he found himself surrounded by utter darkness. Outside circumstances had never overwhelmed him, but the darkness which surrounded him was of such a character that the like of it he had never experienced before. He found that his Ahimsa did not answer in the matter of Hindu-Muslim relations. "This struck me forcibly when I came to learn of the events in Noakhali. The reported forcible conversions and the distress of the Bengali sisters touched me deeply. I could do nothing through pen or speech. I argued to myself that I must be on the scene of action and test the soundness of the doctrine which has sustained me and made life worth living. Was it the weapon of the weak, as it was often held by the critics, or was it truly the weapon of the strong? The question arose in me when I had no ready-made solution for the distemper of which Noakhali was a glaring symptom. And so setting aside all my activities, I hastened to Noakhali to find out where I stood."<sup>10</sup>

He knew positively that Ahimsa is a perfect instrument. If it did not answer in his hands, the imperfection, he argued, must be in him; his technique was at fault. "I could not discover the error from a distance. Hence I came here trying to make the discovery. I must, therefore, own myself in darkness till I see light."<sup>11</sup>

A letter which he wrote to Sardar Patel at this time mirrors his inner travail vividly:

It is 3 a.m. I am dictating this lying in bed. . . . At four I get up and wash. Then will come the morning prayer. This is the present routine. . . .

I am being tested through and through. My truth and Ahimsa are being weighed in a balance more delicate than any a pearl merchant ever used. . . . a balance so delicate as to show the difference of even a hundredth part of a hair.

Truth and Ahimsa are perfect. They can never fail. But I, their exponent, may. This much, however, I do hope that before that happens, merciful God will take me away from this world and send a worthier instrument to carry out His will. . . .

The situation here is most baffling. It is so hard to get at the truth. Himsa masquerades as Ahimsa, irreligion as religion. But is it not just under such circumstances that truth and Ahimsa are truly tested? I know it, I fully realise it; that is why I am here. Do not call me away from here. If I myself run away



from here like a coward defeated, it must be my fate, not India's fault. But I have no such fear. I am out to do or die....<sup>12</sup>

Referring next to the wire from Noakhali, which the Sardar had sent, he proceeded:

You may dismiss the wire as worthless. Exaggeration here knows no bounds. It is not that they exaggerate knowingly. They do not even seem to know what exaggeration means! . . . Imagination in these parts runs riot like the tropical vegetation that presses in on all sides. . . . My advice to you . . . is . . . you should write to the sender of that telegram that he should furnish proof in support of his statements. The Central Government might then be able to do something although constitutionally it has no power (to interfere in the sphere of Provincial autonomy).

Write further that since Gandhi is in their midst, they may depend upon him to do full justice. But he being the arch-priest of truth and Ahimsa, may not be able to fulfil all their expectations. But then, how can they expect anything different from you who have been trained under Gandhi? Be that as it may, as responsible Ministers, you are bound to do your best. You may not tell anybody that since I am here, it is no use anyone approaching you. On the contrary, you must tell them that anybody has a right to appeal to you over my head and that you will give them redress even against me if necessary. For is that also not what I have taught you? . . .

The letter then goes on to refer to the Bihar Muslim League's report on the Bihar disturbances. "Even if fifty per cent. of the things mentioned in it are true, it is bad business. I have not the slightest doubt in my mind that an impartial commission of inquiry, which nobody should be able to cavil at, ought to be appointed without a single day's delay. Whatever truth there may be in the allegations, should be unequivocally and in all humility admitted and the rest referred to the inquiring judge. You may discuss this also with your Muslim League colleagues in the Cabinet."

To another friend he wrote: "People must learn to feel secure and go about fearlessly even though known murderers and criminals are at large. So long as we have not learnt that lesson, we shall never be able to shed our helplessness. It is not a question of violence versus non-violence. A soldier may use his arms in the face of overwhelming odds and die fighting valiantly. But a soldier of non-violence has to prove his mettle, under such circumstances, by facing death valiantly even though unarmed. . . . By giving to the non-violence of the weak the name of Ahimsa, we put to shame the power that is true non-violence. Non-violence of the weak is the coward's expedient. Is that all that India has learnt from me so far?"<sup>13</sup> He then proceeded to disburden himself of a horrible suspicion that had begun to take possession of him. Might it not be that unconsciously he, too, had been



practising and teaching others the "coward's expedient"? If that was so, that could possibly be an explanation of the apparent failure of his Ahimsa in the face of the crisis facing him. To examine himself, he began to subject himself to a series of searching tests, some big, some small, some almost transcendental. He ate less, and with little regard to what he ate. He slept little and worked ceaselessly like a machine to cope with the growing volume of work by himself, or else, he argued, his divesting himself of secretarial assistance had no meaning. Indeed, he regarded his capacity to withstand the strain without a breakdown as a measure of his detachment and faith in God. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: They shall . . . not be weary; and they shall . . . not faint." He had a philosophy that it is not work that kills but the stresses and strains that are set up within us by the absence of poise or detachment. An individual who has completely disciplined his senses and attained a state of dispassion that comes from a living faith in God and emptying oneself of "all save love" will know no fatigue, nor suffer any wear and tear like the ideal machine from which all friction has been eliminated. "When a man loses himself he immediately finds himself in the service of all that lives. It becomes his delight and his recreation. He is . . . never weary of spending himself in the service of God's creation."<sup>14</sup>

He became more and more exact and exacting. He converted himself and his little family of co-workers into tools of research in his spiritual laboratory and developed an extraordinary psychic sensitivity to the slightest variation in the moral atmosphere around him. Even a suggestion of hidden untruth or impurity seared him like red-hot iron. Untruth, negligence of duty or imperfection in his associates, he regarded as a projection of his own shortcomings. Since Manu's arrival a ferment had been set up in the camp. (See Chapter XI). Another in his place would have brushed it aside as a trivial thing or given it a quietus by a very simple expedient. Not he. Nothing escaped his scrutiny, nothing was passed over. Any deviation from Euclid's straight line in himself or his companions was like an unidentified blip on a radar screen to be resolved, tracked and relentlessly pursued to its source. One day he noticed a changed look in the face of one of his companions and recorded his observation in his diary. The next day this friend handed him a note which was preliminary to leaving him. A few days later, this same worker absented himself from the camp without telling him, thinking it to be too trivial a matter to bother him with. But he took a very grave view of it and afterwards remarked that it revealed to him in a flash the nature of the goings-on about him. He was filled with anguish when a trusted co-worker made a statement to another which he denied afterwards when Gandhiji confronted him with it. On still another occasion he became angry and did not rest till he had owned his lapse and "utter unworthiness" before the evening prayer gathering.



That night he woke up at 3.15 a.m. and worked till prayer time. In his diary for that day there is the following entry: "How shall I cope with the multitude of problems that beset me? All around me is raging fire. . . . Thank God, it is my day of silence."<sup>15</sup> Next follows a reference to the advice he gave to the refugees from Nandigram village: "Told them not to launch on a hunger-strike as a protest against the treatment in the refugee camp but to give me a chance to strive with the authorities." The diary proceeds: "Abdullah (Superintendent of Police) handed me two printed placards (put up by a section of the Muslims hostile to his mission) demanding my expulsion from Noakhali." Other entries follow. They reveal the same ceaseless hour-to-hour and minute-to-minute self-examination and crucifixion of the spirit. Here are some of them:

13th December, 1946

Wrote to B. that anti-untouchability work proceeds at a snail's pace. . . . A worker who wants to work for this great cause has need to be duty (dharma) incarnate. . . .

For the evening meal had a *khakhara* (a paper-thin wafer) from two *tolas* of barley meal . . . followed later by some jaggery. That allayed hunger.

14th December, 1946

Got up at 2.30 a.m. Applied sulphur ointment for scabies, then went off to sleep with the help of Ramanama.

15th December, 1946

Had a visit from Justice D. and his wife. Told them it was not possible to work in Noakhali without renouncing one's all.

16th December, 1946

S. and his friend have come with the desire to work under me in Noakhali. Told them that is hardly possible while I am still surrounded by darkness. They should go and report themselves to the Superintendent of Police, Abdullah; I have no accommodation or any amenities to offer them.

21st December, 1946

After the morning prayer, worked on reports of prayer addresses till it was time for the morning walk. Walked double the usual distance. It took 40 minutes; however felt no fatigue. . . . Dictated a letter to Suhrawardy while having the mid-day meal. Birla's man brought some fruit from Calcutta. Had to give him time. That left very little time for spinning. Felt most unhappy.

22nd December, 1946

Woke up at 1.30 a.m. Worked till prayer time.

26th December, 1946

Everything seems to be going awry. There is falsehood all around.



1st January, 1947

Woke up at 12 at night. Talked to Manu for one hour. Letter writing and Bengali exercise from 3.15 till the prayer time. At 6.15 a.m. fell into a doze and had a very sweet nap for four or five minutes after which woke up greatly refreshed.... More letter writing.... Dozed off again while dictating a letter.

2nd January, 1947

Have been awake since 2 a.m. God's grace alone is sustaining me. I can see there is some grave defect in me somewhere which is the cause of all this. All around me is utter darkness. When will God take me out of this darkness into His light?

He redoubled his vigilance. He was sailing on uncharted seas, taking his soundings every half an hour, as it were. People came to him to ask how best they could be of help to him. He told them he could offer no advice as he was himself groping in darkness. He even felt, he said, that it would have, perhaps, been better for his mission if he had come all alone. It would have saved him from much of the ignorant criticism that had been levelled against him. He needed to be alone to place himself entirely in God's hands. He, therefore, suggested that people should not come to him to ask how they could help him in his mission, much less depend upon him for guidance. In order, further, not to give room for any criticism, all those who were keen on working in Noakhali should obtain written permission from the League Ministry, place before them their plans and start work only if the Ministers agreed, keeping strictly within the four corners of their instructions. He was making that suggestion, he said, because he was regarded by the Muslim League as its enemy. If people came to assist him, they would be suspect and it would be thought that he had imported them to undermine the power of the League. He made it clear to all concerned that he had no intention whatsoever to challenge the writ of the Muslim League in Bengal or to weaken the League Ministry of Bengal in any way. He had come to Noakhali on the most serious undertaking of his life. Here was a community which was once friendly to him, but which now regarded him as its arch enemy. He was out to prove by his actions that he was not their enemy but a friend. "That is why I have chosen Noakhali, where Muslims are in a decisive majority, as the seat of the most serious experiment in my life. I myself do not yet know how I can convince the Muslims of the sincerity of my purpose. I am not in a position, therefore, to direct the activity of others. The blind cannot guide the lame."<sup>16</sup> He hinted that it might be necessary for him in the near future "to take to the road" with God as his "sole, invisible companion".

Gandhiji's statements caused deep concern to his friends and colleagues. They were worried at his resolve to bury himself in Noakhali indefinitely. The farther he ventured out, the stormier it threatened to



become. The fate of India was being decided at Delhi. What Gandhiji was doing, they felt, was like trying to still the tempest by preventing the forest leaves from rustling. Noakhali was only a symptom. The malady needed to be tackled at the root. He must, therefore, now return. Whatever good his stay in Noakhali was to do had already been done. Its further prolongation would only exasperate the Muslim League.

But Gandhiji thought otherwise. Insofar as the Muslim League was concerned, he had come to a dead-end. There was nothing further he could do on the political plane short of surrendering his principle. But in Noakhali there was a lot to be done amongst the masses of Hindus and Muslims. Their needs were the same, their difficulties and problems were alike and admitted of a common solution. He would go and live in their midst, become one with them, share their life and make them share his. He would teach them to overcome ignorance, poverty and disease, and inculcate on them faith in and worship of one God who is the same for both Hindus and Muslims. When he had thus entered into their minds and helped them to enter his, then would perhaps come the time when the atmosphere would change and sweetness prevail between Hindus and Muslims where bitterness prevailed before. The Muslims would then see that he and his cause were one and the difference that divided them would lose its sting. As with the atom so with the universe, if *real* peace could be established in any corner of India, it would permeate the whole country, nay, perhaps the whole world.

“Wherever in the world truth and non-violence reign supreme there is peace and bliss,” he had declared before his departure to Noakhali.<sup>17</sup> The reason why the magic did not work in the present case, perhaps, was that the unbridged hiatus between his ideals and practice somewhere interposed a barrier between him and truth, and that choked the action of his non-violence or soul force. To a certain extent this is inevitable. It is not given to man to eliminate this hiatus altogether so long as one is in the flesh. But through persistent effort, the barrier—as obstinate as the sound-barrier with which the science of supersonics has familiarised us—may be progressively attenuated. Once the critical limit is passed, all further turbulence will cease, the barrier will be pierced, and a power released to which there is no limit and before which all hatred and suspicion must vanish like the morning mists before the rising sun.

Friends tried to argue: From a distance they saw light shimmering through his plan of action in Noakhali. There was enough proof that confidence was slowly returning among the riot-affected people. But, rejoined Gandhiji, they had missed his point. The reason for his darkness lay not outside but within him. They had it on the authority of Patanjali's *Yogasutra* that when the ideal of Ahimsa is completely



realised in an individual, it completely dissolves the forces of enmity and evil in its neighbourhood. The beasts of the jungle forget their natural antipathies in its presence and become friends; even ferocious animals like tigers, scorpions and snakes shed their fierceness and become harmless. That stage had not been reached in Noakhali, and that led him to infer that there was something lacking in his striving for Ahimsa. That was why he had been saying that there was still nothing but darkness around him.

"It is quite clear to me," he declared, "my word carries very little weight. Distrust has gone too deep for exhortation." As soon as water in the rice-fields dried up, and his arrangements were completed, he would set out on foot on a village-to-village tour to take the message of goodwill and peace from door to door. He would not return to the village from which he started. There would be no time limit. He would share the life of the villagers and become one with them. He would proceed with as few companions as possible on his march and preferably stay in the houses of Muslim friends. He would like to go absolutely unprotected so that everybody could see that in his heart he had nothing but love and friendship for the Muslims.

Was he not taking too grave a risk in embarking on such a venture at his age and in the conditions prevailing in Noakhali? If any mad-cap ran amok and any harm befell him, it would jeopardise the very mission on which he had set out. But he remained unconvinced. The path of the Lord was not for the timid or the faint-hearted. His body had become shaky and difficult bridges might have to be crossed in the course of his contemplated venture. But if the call of God required him to brave physical danger and he hesitated, God would not forgive him. He had, therefore, no choice left, he said, but to face the dangers of the road. There were many instances of men who could not be protected even though surrounded by thousands of helpers; earthly aid had proved of no avail against the will of God. Even more true was its converse. God was mightier than the mightiest; in Him alone true safety lay. But then one needed a stout heart to travel along the lonesome road of God.

This then was the meaning of the repeated risks he had been taking with his health to accustom himself to untried and naturally available dietaries; of progressively increasing the length of his walks to inure himself to arduous journeys on foot; poring over his Bengali lessons at unearthly hours; and at three score and eighteen, practising the crossing of slippery, single-log, rickety bridges unaided at grave peril to himself, with a persistence and pertinacity which many found hard to understand.

He was in dreadful earnest. Supposing, as he proceeded with his mission, he found himself in the end left alone, would he turn back defeated because he could not cross a shaky *shanko* unaided or because



of the language difficulty? No, he must have not only the courage but also the competence to venture forth all alone if need be.

He had once set down the qualifications and training necessary for a Satyagrahi soldier as follows:

If the Satyagrahi is not healthy in mind and body, he may . . . fail in mustering complete fearlessness. He should have the capacity to stand guard at a single spot day and night; he must not fall ill even if he has to bear cold and heat and rain; he must have the strength to go to places of peril, to rush to scenes of fire, and the courage to wander about alone in desolate jungles and haunts of death; he will bear, without a grumble, severe beatings, starvation and worse, and will keep to his post of duty without flinching; will have the resourcefulness and capacity to plunge into a seemingly impenetrable scene of rioting; he will have the longing and capacity to run with the name of God on his lips to the rescue of men living on the top-storeys of buildings enveloped in flames; he will have the fearlessness to plunge into a flood in order to rescue people being carried off by it or to jump down a well to save a drowning person.<sup>18</sup>

It was to this end he had been preparing himself through all the preceding weeks. The idea ultimately seemed to be, as soon as he had mastered Bengali sufficiently, to do away even with his Bengali interpreter and melt into the surrounding ocean of humanity like a drop in the ocean. He would go from village to village and hut to hut and let his "acts and honesties" speak for themselves. In a letter to Mirabehn, he wrote: "If I succeed in emptying myself utterly, God will possess me. Then . . . everything will come true; but it is a serious question when I shall have reduced myself to zero."<sup>19</sup>

### 3

The quiet and hitherto semi-deserted little village of Srirampur was transformed almost overnight and put on a gala appearance for the next few days when Pandit Nehru, accompanied by Acharya Kripalani, the Congress President, and some other Congress leaders came there on a brief visit to meet Gandhiji in the last week of December, 1946.

The party arrived at about midnight. Gandhiji had then been already asleep for two hours. By the time some of the guests were ready to go to bed, he got out of his, to face the day at half-past two. With his characteristic delicacy in regard to the little graces of life, which never deserted him even in the most trying circumstances, he had given minute instructions about the arrangements to be made for the accommodation and convenience of the guests. He used to carry with him wherever he went a few essential articles of personal daily use like a hand-basin, a commode etc., so as not to inconvenience his hosts. He had them all sent to Pandit Nehru's hut to make things a bit easier for him. But Pandit Nehru, when he came to know of it, would



not hear of it and hauled poor Manu over live coals for allowing Gandhiji to put himself to inconvenience.

"Bapu gave orders, what could I do?" Manu protested.

"Then you should have disobeyed," replied Pandit Nehru with affected sternness. As she still hesitated, he added: "You could have told him Jawaharlal forbade you. Such orders are not to be obeyed even though he slaughter you."

"But do not be scared, he won't," he continued with a merry twinkle and a kindly affectionate laugh to set the frightened girl at her ease.

"That is Jawaharlal; so let it be," remarked Gandhiji when the incident was reported to him next morning. And so the hand-basin, the commode and the other little things came back unused and were reinstalled as before in Gandhiji's improvised little bathroom.

Eager crowds of both Hindus and Muslims from the surrounding villages besieged the place during the stay of the visitors from Delhi. They broke through the cordon and swarmed into Gandhiji's prayer *pandal*.

"So, this is your lone sojourn!" Pandit Nehru twitted Gandhiji.

"You forget I am a Mahatma, too!" replied Gandhiji with a hearty laugh.

They then proceeded to discuss business. Pandit Nehru narrated to Gandhiji how the rift between the Congress and the League had been widening since his departure from Delhi; how the League had, by its obstructionist tactics in the Interim Government, managed to put off, till the ensuing budget session, the announcement about the abolition of the salt tax which had been decided upon before the League came into the Interim Government; how these tactics had brought about a condition nearing a stalemate in the Cabinet and had led the Congress members of the Interim Government to give Lord Wavell notice of resignation; how Lord Wavell, on the other hand, was using the stalemate as an argument for making further concessions to the Muslim League and for asking the Congress to form coalition Governments even in the Provinces; in other words to plant a "king's party" in the Cabinet of every Congress Province. Gandhiji, on his part, explained to Pandit Nehru the technique of non-violence which he was pursuing in Noakhali. The I.N.A. people had come to him to offer their services. But he had insisted on their first obtaining written permission from the Chief Minister of Bengal to work in Noakhali.

"There you are perfectly right," Pandit Nehru remarked. "Otherwise they might think you want to overwhelm them by importing Sikhs from outside."

"My viewpoint is," resumed Gandhiji, "that if they give the permission, we are the gainers. If they won't, we are gainers still. Come what may, I shall never play false or deceive the League."



“I quite agree; but how many of us here are today prepared to follow your strict code?” interposed Pandit Nehru.

“All the more reason why I should,” rejoined Gandhiji.

It was nearly two months that Gandhiji had been away from Delhi. Things had not been moving happily at the Centre since his departure. A crisis seemed imminent.

The Constituent Assembly had met on 9th December, and adjourned after a general discussion of the “Objectives Resolution” in order to make things as smooth and easy as possible for the League to come in. But the Muslim League had not reversed its previous decision to boycott it, and Lord Wavell, who had brought the League into the Interim Government on the basis of an oral assurance that the League was coming into the Interim Government with the intention of cooperating and that it would join the Constituent Assembly, kept enigmatically silent when Jinnah repudiated having given any such assurance, written or oral.

The deadlock between the Cabinet Mission and the Congress over the interpretation of the clauses relating to Grouping continued unresolved. The Congress had offered to refer the matter to the Federal Court and abide by its decision but the Muslim League was not agreeable to it. Jinnah said, the issue was not “justiciable”, and “unequivocal acceptance” by the Congress of the Cabinet Mission’s interpretation of the clauses about Grouping was the precondition of the League joining the Constituent Assembly. The Congress, on the other hand, demanded that the Muslim League having come into the Interim Government on the distinct understanding that it had accepted the Cabinet Mission’s statement of 16th May, 1946 (in fact, it could not have come otherwise) and would be joining the Interim Government with the intention of cooperating in the Constituent Assembly, it should, therefore, either implement that assurance or go out of the Interim Government.

In order to bring about an agreement between the two major parties, His Majesty’s Government invited the Viceroy and the leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League to London for consultation. The Congress was unwilling to accept the invitation. “We attach . . . great importance to the holding of the meeting of the Constituent Assembly on the date fixed, namely 9th December,” wrote Pandit Nehru to Lord Wavell on the 26th November. “The invitation to us to go to London appears to us to reopen the whole problem which was settled to a large extent by the Cabinet Mission’s statement. . . . Any further postponement . . . would . . . result in the abandonment of the plan.” The British Prime Minister, however, assured Pandit Nehru that there was no intention of abandoning either the decision for the Assembly to meet or the plan put forward by the Cabinet Delegation



and that it was their desire "to see that this is (was) implemented in full".<sup>20</sup> At the same time to Jinnah, who refused to attend the proposed conference "unless it is open to us to discuss the whole situation", the assurance was given that "there is (was) nothing in it to prejudice full consideration of all points of view."<sup>21</sup>

Sardar Patel was against going to London. But when the British Prime Minister pressed again and again, the Congress High Command felt that it would be wrong to refuse the invitation. "Nothing may come out of it but nothing will be lost."<sup>22</sup> And so Pandit Nehru went.

The talks failed. The denouement came on the 6th December, when the British Government put an end to the controversy about the interpretation of the Grouping clause by an "act of State". A declaration was made in both the Houses of Parliament that H.M.G. had legal advice which confirmed that the statement of the 16th May meant what they had always stated was their intention, namely, that voting in the Sections should, in the absence of an agreement to the contrary, be taken by a simple majority vote of the representatives in the Sections and that part of the statement so interpreted should, therefore, be considered an essential part of the scheme of the 16th May. The Constituent Assembly was free to refer the matter to the Federal Court, if it so wished, but if the Muslim League could not be persuaded to come into the Constituent Assembly and a constitution came to be framed without the participation of the League, parts of the country in which the Muslim League was in a majority, could not be held to be bound by the results. H. M. G. would not, therefore, undertake to submit to Parliament for acceptance the constitution so framed, as they could not contemplate "forcing such a constitution upon any unwilling part of the country". "That position," observed Sir Stafford Cripps on the 12th December in the House of Commons, "had always been realised by the Congress, which had repeatedly said that they would not coerce unwilling areas to accept the new constitution."

In spite of the fact that the British Government had prejudiced the issue by releasing the legal opinion of their Attorney-General and Jinnah had repudiated in advance any adverse decision by the Federal Court, the Congress Working Committee decided to refer the point at issue to the Federal Court in terms of H. M. G.'s declaration. Once the Constituent Assembly was inaugurated, its proceedings could not be interrupted by reason of the abstention of a group or a section. Nor could the validity of the constitution that it might frame be questioned, at least in respect of the areas represented in it. But hardly had that decision been taken when a statement was made by Lord Pethick-Lawrence in the House of Lords on 17th December to the effect that H. M. G. would "by no means depart from their interpretation even if the Federal Court should be appealed to". It rendered any reference to the Federal Court meaningless.



Most unhappy was Sardar Patel. "It shall never happen again in our life time," he had penitently told Gandhiji after the rejection by the British Government of the Poona offer of the Congress in 1940 when he and the Congress Working Committee had parted company with him on the issue of participation in the Second World War. It had cost him not a little again in June, 1946, to go against Gandhiji to get the Working Committee to accept the Cabinet Mission's plan of 16th May, when Gandhiji's instinct was opposed to it. And now the Cabinet Mission had left the Congress stranded high and dry. In a letter to Sir Stafford Cripps, on the 15th December, the Sardar wrote:

When the invitation (to go to London came, our first instinct was to decline to accept it. But the Prime Minister's appeal and his assurance in reply to our cable created a feeling in Pandit Nehru's mind that the refusal to accept the invitation may be regarded as an act of discourtesy; and he left India full of hopes for a message of goodwill and sympathy, but he returned sadly disappointed. He now realizes his mistake....

You called the League delegation there at a time when there was some realisation that violence is a game at which both parties can play.... Just when the time for settlement was reached, Jinnah got the invitation and he was able to convince the Muslims once again that he has been able to get more concessions by creating trouble and violence....

In London the stage was set against us.... Your interpretation means that Bengal... can draft the constitution of Assam. It is amazing. Do you think such a monstrous proposition can be accepted by... Assam, particularly after the sad experience of wholesale forcible conversions, arson, looting, rape and forcible marriages? You can have no idea of the resentment and anger caused by your emphasis on this interpretation. If you think that Assam can be coerced to accept the domination of Bengal, the sooner you get rid of that illusion the better.... If they frame the constitution of Assam in such a way as to make Assamese opting out impossible, what is the remedy in your statement?

You know that Gandhiji at the age of 77 is spending all his energy in the devastated Hindu homes in Eastern Bengal and trying to recover the lost girls and bring back those forcibly converted to their old faith. But he is working against heavy odds.... He is surrounded by a very hostile atmosphere. In the event of his death there in these circumstances, what will happen no one can say. I shudder to think of the consequences....

You must have seen what Jinnah has said in London immediately after the debate. He swears by Pakistan, and everything conceded to him is to be used as a lever to work to that end. You wish that we should agree to help him in his dream.... You know *when Gandhiji was strongly against our settlement, I threw my weight in favour of it. You have created a very unpleasant situation for me. All of us here feel that there has been a betrayal.* The solution has now been made more difficult, nay almost impossible. The settlement can only be made if there is no outside interference and the parties are left alone. The Viceroy would not give



us peace. We have to work through this. It is an impossible situation . . . (Italics mine).

The British Government's decision of 6th December, raised a life and death issue for Assam and in a measure for the North-West Frontier Province. If the Congress accepted the Mission's interpretation of the Grouping clauses, Assam, where the Hindus and the Congress constituted the majority, would pass under the control of the Muslim League Government of Bengal which was wedded to Pakistan. On the other hand, if Assam refused to abide by the decision of the Congress, would it not be held guilty of disloyalty to the Congress and expose itself to the charge of wrecking the Constituent Assembly and thereby furthering the game of the Muslim League? Should Assam immolate itself so as not to block the progress of the rest of India?

It was to seek a way out of this dilemma and, if possible, to persuade Gandhiji to disengage himself from Noakhali and return to Delhi, where his presence and advice were badly needed, that the Congress leaders had come to meet Gandhiji and have consultation with him.

Gandhiji's advice was clear. Rightly or wrongly the Congress had come to the decision that it would stand by the decision of the Federal Court. It had to play the game even against heavily loaded dice and lose if necessary. "The decision of the Federal Court will go against the Congress interpretation of Grouping as far as I can make out, for the simple reason that the (British) Cabinet says it has got legal advice which upholds their decision. The Federal Court is the creation of the British. It is a packed court."<sup>23</sup> But Assam must not lose its soul. It should not join the Section. "No-one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do."<sup>24</sup> It should lodge its protest, retire from the Constituent Assembly, and frame its own constitution as an autonomous unit. "Not only a Province but even a single individual can rebel against the Congress and by doing so serve it, assuming that the Province or the individual is in the right. I have done so myself. That would be a kind of Satyagraha against the Congress for the good of the Congress. . . . For the independence of India it is the only condition. Each unit must be able to decide and act for itself."

But if Assam and the North-West Frontier Province kept out of the Section, the Muslim League might not come into the Constituent Assembly and if, in the teeth of the League's boycott, the Constituent Assembly framed a constitution, H. M. G. might not take any notice of it and it would remain a dead-letter.

The Congress was faced by a dilemma. It found itself surrounded by an impenetrable ring of steel. It had repeatedly made its position clear to the British Government and its representatives as to the Congress interpretation of the Cabinet Mission's statement of 16th May. It was with full knowledge of that position that the Cabinet Mission had



decided that it was an "acceptance" of their plan and on that basis the Viceroy, with the approval of H. M. G., had invited the Congress President to form the Interim Government at the Centre. In the course of his broadcast of the 24th August, again, the Viceroy, in appealing to the Muslim League to accept the Cabinet Mission plan and join the Interim Government, had pointed out that the Congress was prepared to refer any dispute as regards interpretation to the Federal Court, which meant, if it meant anything, that this was regarded as sufficient answer to the objections raised by the Muslim League. In his letter of 1st June, 1946, addressed to Master Tara Singh, the Sikh leader, the Secretary of State had said that the Mission would not "issue any addition to or interpretation of the statement (of 16th May)." It was again on the basis of an assurance of Prime Minister Attlee, that they had no desire to alter the plan, that Pandit Nehru had agreed to go to London much against his own inclination and against the considered judgment of some of his colleagues in the Working Committee. In spite of all that, the British Government had now issued a statement which clearly, in several respects, went beyond the original statement of the Cabinet Mission. Should the Congress in view of the substantial modification introduced into it by the subsequent declarations of H.M.G. denounce the State Paper of 16th May and choose once more to go into the wilderness? There was ample justification for such a course. That would mean a bitter and perhaps prolonged struggle on a vaster scale even than before, with the forces of the British Government and League probably ranged against it. Should the Congress take the risk? If, on the other hand, it accepted the 6th December declaration of H. M. G., would it not amount to letting down Assam and the North-West Frontier and truckling to the bullying tactics of the League at the very threshold of the Constituent Assembly? Where would the process end?

"If we take care of the facts of a case, the law will take care of itself," Mr. Leonard, Gandhiji's senior counsel in South Africa, used to tell him whenever a case came up in which justice was on Gandhiji's side but the letter of the law seemed to go against him. Gandhiji had never forgotten that lesson. In the course of his legal practice in the South African law courts and later as a leader in the political life of the country he always took care of his facts above everything. He was never known to slur over an adverse fact, however inconvenient or prejudicial it might seem to be to his client. His method was frankly to admit all that went against his client and restate the adversary's case with a fairness and understanding which the latter himself could scarcely have excelled and then argue for his client on the basis of justice and equity. He had, therefore, during his interview with Lord Wavell of the 28th September, 1946, without a moment's hesitation agreed with him that if the League persisted in its boycott of the Constituent Assembly, the Constituent Assembly could not properly meet



under the 16th May statement of the Cabinet Mission. His view at that time had not commended itself to his colleagues in the Congress Working Committee. But he was emphatic that if the boycotters could be kept under restraint only by the force of British bayonets, even though he might be the only one to hold that view he would not find fault with the British Government if, under the circumstances, the Constituent Assembly was not called. In a note from Srirampur, which he addressed to the Congress Working Committee on the eve of the opening of the Constituent Assembly's session, he reiterated that view. If the Government wanted to proceed with the Constituent Assembly in spite of the boycott, they could legitimately do so only by withdrawing the statement of the 16th May and issuing another in its place after consultation with the principal Indian parties. "It should never be forgotten that however powerful the Congress has become, the Constituent Assembly as contemplated today can only meet by action of the British Government."<sup>25</sup>

Even if the Constituent Assembly met with the willing cooperation of the British Government in the teeth of the Muslim League's boycott, argued Gandhiji, it would still be meeting under the "visible or invisible protection" of the British forces whether Indian or European. "In my opinion, we shall never reach a satisfactory constitution in these circumstances. Whether we own it or not, our weakness will be felt by the whole world."<sup>26</sup> The best course, in the circumstances, therefore, was to cry off the Constituent Assembly and in its place convene, if the Congress felt it had attained "a certain degree of status and strength" to warrant it, a Constituent Assembly of their own "irrespective of the British Government". That would mean that they would have to seek the cooperation of all the parties including the Muslim League and the Princes, and the "Constituent Assembly can meet . . . even if some do not join. Thus it may be only the Congress Provinces plus Princes who may care to join."<sup>27</sup>

But if this course did not appeal to the Congress leaders, or if this was considered to be too late in the day, the second best course was to accept the British Government's interpretation in regard to the clauses about Grouping, or rather "a joint interpretation of it between themselves and Jinnah".<sup>28</sup> But the Congress must in that event at the same time make it clear that it would be open to Assam and the North-West Frontier Province "to secede from the Congress for the purpose of the Constituent Assembly".<sup>29</sup> The Congress as a voluntary organisation had "no power save the moral" over the units. It could not compel a unit against the will of the people concerned. It had recognised that kind of Satyagrahic freedom in action on the part of the component Congress units ever since the beginning of the non-cooperation era. This would be in accordance, too, with the Cabinet Mission's declaration that they would "not compel any group or Province".



The consequence of this might be that Assam in the east and the Frontier Province in the west, the Sikhs in the Punjab, and, perhaps, Baluchistan would prefer to keep out of the Constituent Assembly or any of its Sections in the initial stages. The units comprising Section A, with such other elements as might choose, would then meet in the Constituent Assembly and frame a full constitution of independence in terms of the Cabinet Mission's plan and Sections B and C would have to frame "what they could in spite of the seceders". The constitution would be for the whole of India, but it would be *initially binding on the participating units alone*. It would have a specific clause showing in what way such of the seceders as might wish to avail themselves of it later could come in. This would throw upon those who would frame the constitution the burden of producing a constitution which should be eminently fair, just and generous. The British Government would be bound to recognise the constitution thus framed since it would not have to be imposed on any unwilling parts. It would ensure a fair deal to everybody and it would give to Jinnah an inoffensive and universally acceptable formula for his Pakistan—a Pakistan based on the willing consent of all the parties concerned.

It might be argued, said Gandhiji, that the British Government would recognise or set up another Constituent Assembly as demanded by the Muslim League. If they did that, "they will damn themselves for ever".<sup>30</sup> For it was pledged to recognise a constitution that might be framed in terms of the Cabinet Mission's statement as interpreted by the 6th December statement of H.M.G., and then withdraw, leaving "the rest to fate, every vestige of the British authority being wiped out, British soldiers retiring from India never to return".<sup>31</sup>

Would not such a course on the part of the Congress be regarded as a surrender to Jinnah or the Muslim League? Gandhiji said, he did not mind the charge, "because the waiver will not be an act of weakness, it would be one of Congress strength, because it would be due to the logic of facts".<sup>32</sup> A Satyagrahi never shirks right action because it coincides with the opponent's view.

This in brief was Gandhiji's solution as it finally emerged from the talks with the Congress leaders and which was later embodied in the All-India Congress Committee's resolution of 6th January, 1947.

The object of Satyagraha always being a settlement with the opponent, without sacrifice of principle, Gandhiji was ever ready to examine any proposal that might come from the other side, even though it might differ radically from his own. In doing so, he sterilised it of any flaws that might be in it. Having in the first instance left the Provinces free to form or not to form groups, the Cabinet Mission had subsequently, with a view to bring the Muslim League into the Constituent Assembly and if possible save the common Centre, virtually sought to compel Assam, North-west Frontier Province and Baluchistan to act



against the wishes of their chosen representatives and allow their future to be decided by the Muslim League by the device of voting in Sections. The object was laudable but their means were wrong. By trying to sell the same article to different parties under different names they had created for themselves a well-nigh insoluble and hopelessly self-contradictory situation. The 6th December statement of H.M.G. sought to give to the original flaws in the Cabinet Mission's statement the garb of legality but left the parties affected by it with a grievous sense of injustice. By unflinching adherence to truth, Gandhiji found a fourth-dimensional way of escape, as it were, out of the impenetrable steel ring that had been thrown round the Congress and showed to the British Government how the ends of justice could be met while keeping strictly within the four corners of the declarations of the Cabinet Mission and H.M.G. It put all parties on their trial. The only demand it made was that there should be cent per cent. sincerity on the part of all concerned. He for one was resolved to come out of the test with full marks or perish in the attempt.

Pandit Nehru's plea with Gandhiji to return to Delhi did not succeed. The only record of their conversation in that regard is to be found in a cryptic entry in Gandhiji's diary under the date 30th December, 1946: "Jawaharlal had about ten minutes' talk before leaving. It was to the effect that I ought to be with them at Delhi." A personal note to Pandit Nehru, which he scribbled at 3 o'clock that morning, ran:

Your affection is extraordinary and so natural! Come again, when you wish, or send someone who understands you and will faithfully interpret my reactions . . . when in your opinion consultation is necessary and you cannot come. Nor is it seemly that you should often run to me even though I claim to be like a wise father to you, having no less love towards you than Motilalji.

Do not depart from the spirit of the draft you showed me yesterday . . . . Somehow or other I feel that my judgment about the communal problems and the political situation is true. I have no doubt now about the wisdom of what I had said in Delhi when the Working Committee accepted the Cabinet Mission's statement. This does not mean that what was done by the Working Committee should not have been done. On the contrary, I had completely associated myself with all that the Working Committee did. I could not support with reason what I had felt so vaguely.

*This time* it is quite different. My reason wholly supports my heart. I notice daily verification. So, I suggest frequent consultations with an old, tried servant of the nation.

It is easy to be wise after the event and criticise those who were faced with the responsibility of taking a difficult decision in circumstances of unprecedented difficulty. But one cannot help feeling in retrospect that India did not gain very much by the Congress leaders



rejecting Gandhiji's instinct in June, 1946, when they accepted the Cabinet Mission's plan. It would perhaps have been better in the long run if they had patiently decided to remain in the wilderness till the Cabinet Mission were ready to leave their diplomatic double-talk behind and settle the issue in a straight and square way. As it was, the Congress leaders had practically to throw away what they had gained by dropping their pilot—though with his consent—and what remained with them as the fruit of their tactical victory stuck in their throat till ultimately in sheer desperation they were glad to escape from it by plumping for partition.

On the morning of the 30th December, 1946, at half-past seven, Pandit Nehru and party left Srirampur. Gandhiji accompanied them as far as the end of his walk and there bade them farewell. The party reached the nearby village of Madhupur on foot and from there were taken to Feni aerodrome by jeep.

"It is always a pleasure and inspiration," remarked Pandit Nehru to press representatives at Delhi, "to meet this young man of seventy-seven. We always feel a little younger and stronger after meeting him and the burdens we carry seem a little lighter."



PART TWO  
PILGRIM'S PROGRESS







## CHAPTER VII

### THE BARE-FOOTED PILGRIM

#### 1

PANDIT NEHRU's visit to Srirampur was like a meteor-burst across the overcast skies of Noakhali. For a brief while it lifted the gloom and filled all hearts with its cheering glow. After his departure, life in the village resumed its normal, even flow and Gandhiji was again absorbed in his quest.

Two days later, on New Year's Day, Gandhiji took leave of the people of the village. His stay in the village, he said, had been amply enriched by the abundance of love showered upon him by the members of the family with which he had been living. But God had so ordained that he could never stay at one place for long. His travels had been crowded with experiences both bitter and sweet. Contact and separation were the normal incidents of human life. It was his daily prayer that God might give him strength to pass through life's varying experience with equipoise and when he left a place, the people might say of him that in him there was one who was their friend, not an enemy.

It was the beginning of the New Year. He prayed that the audience might be ushered into it freed from the impurities of the lower self and rendered fitter as instruments of service for the common cause. He invited all friends to help him by pointing out to him any faults or shortcomings that they found in him; friends were friends only when they helped us in our striving for self-purification. He then presented to the congregation portions from a Christian hymn out of a collection which Rajkumari Amrit Kaur had transcribed for him in her beautiful hand:

1. New every morning is the love  
Our waking and uprising prove;  
Through sleep and darkness safely brought,  
Restored to life, and power and thought.
2. New mercies each returning day,  
Hover around us while we pray;  
New perils past, new sins forgiven,  
New thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.
3. If on our daily course our mind,  
Be set to hallow all we find,  
New treasures still, of countless price,  
God will provide for sacrifice.



4. The trivial round, the common task,  
Will furnish all we need to ask,  
Room to deny ourselves, a road,  
To bring us daily nearer God.

For two days prior to his departure, it had been noticed that there had been an extra influx of Muslim visitors to Gandhiji's hut from the neighbourhood. "Those who had once looked upon him with suspicion and distrust," ran a Press message from Srirampur, "now come here with reverence and gratitude. These are some of the indications that Gandhiji's ethical approach to the bitter problem is working at a slow but steady pace."<sup>1</sup> A local Muslim was heard to remark after a visit to him: "We have great regard for Gandhiji and we want him to stay on here."<sup>2</sup> Even more significant portent was a remark made by Shaheed Suhrawardy in a Press interview in which he said that he hoped "Mahatma Gandhi would succeed in his mission not merely in Bengal but also in other parts of India."<sup>3</sup>

But in Gandhiji's heart there raged a storm. Reports had come to him of discord among the members of the Congress Working Committee. A difference in temperament and approach divided Sardar Patel from Pandit Nehru. It had been there all along but had not stood in the way of their working together as a team during twenty-five years of India's non-violent freedom struggle. In due course the differences were brought before Gandhiji and ironed out. In his presence they could afford to be outspoken with each other. A fundamental loyalty to the cause and their common regard and affection for Gandhiji and Gandhiji's for them had forged an indissoluble bond that transcended all differences. Both were great in their own way—utterly selfless and dedicated to the country's cause. But their seconds, sometimes in their excess of personal zeal, ill-served their masters. And that was behind the present tension, too. In a letter to the Sardar, after Pandit Nehru's visit, Gandhiji wrote:

I heard many complaints against you.... Your speeches are inflammatory and made to please the crowd; you have left behind all distinction between violence and non-violence; you are teaching the people to meet sword by the sword; you miss no opportunity to insult the League in season and out of season. All this is very harmful if true. They say, you talk about sticking to office. That again is very jarring, if it is true. Whatever I have heard I have passed on to you for your consideration. This is a very delicate time. If we deviate from the straight path by ever so little, we are done for. There is not that unison in the Working Committee that there should be. Root out corruption—you know how to do it. Send some trustworthy and intelligent person, if you think fit, to explain things to me and understand my mind. There is no need whatever for you to come yourself. You are no longer physically fit to run about. You seem to take no care of your health; this is bad.<sup>4</sup>



There was a tinge of hurt feeling in the Sardar's reply:

I have your letter. It has pained me. Naturally you have written on the basis of the reports that you have received and the complaints that you have heard. The complaints are false of course but some of them do not even make sense.

The charge that I want to stick to office is a pure concoction. Only, I was opposed to Jawaharlal's hurling idle threats of resigning from the Interim Government. They damage the prestige of the Congress and have a demoralising effect on the services. We should take a firm decision to resign first. Repetition of empty threats has lost us the Viceroy's respect and now he regards our threats of resignation as nothing but bluff. It took me not a moment to offer my resignation when the Viceroy demanded the surrender of my portfolio. It was no bluff and it had a very salutary effect. What interest have I in sticking to office? I am bed-ridden. I would feel happy and relieved to be a free man once more. . . . I cannot understand how you could lend ear to such a complaint.

Not even any Leaguer has said that I insult the League time and again. It is news to me that my speeches are made with an eye to the gallery. It is my habit to tell people the bitterest truths. At the time of the Royal Indian Navy mutiny, I condemned the disturbances unsparingly and without mincing words even though it displeased many at the time. . . . The remark about meeting sword by the sword has been torn out of a long passage and presented out of context.

If there are divisions in the Working Committee, they are not today's growth. They have been there for a long time. At present, on the contrary, there is a very large measure of accord in most matters. If any of my colleagues has complained to you about me I should like to know. None of them has said anything to me.<sup>5</sup>

The Sardar's letter concluded: "The confidential reports which the Bengal Government and the Governor of Bengal are sending regarding your continued stay in Bengal are very bad. They wish to push you out from there."

The Sardar's reply was perfect so far as it went. The charge of personal ambition was beneath contempt. But Gandhiji's worry was deeper. True, the Sardar did not want office for himself. But obviously he prized it for the power it gave to the Congress. If the Sardar had shared his belief that "non-violence is the mightiest force" on earth, he would have prized more highly his formidable role as the Sardar of Bardoli than that of the Minister for Home Affairs in the Interim Government. In the crisis that confronted them, what was needed was not fighting courage but the courage of calm, self-confident strength, and self-possession that is proof against all panic or provocation and which goes forth to the opponent as love to heal, to disarm and to conquer. This could not be inculcated by argument; it could only be communicated by direct experience. His next letter to the Sardar breathed only his deep concern for his health: "Your health makes me feel anxious. You must get well. There is yet so much to do. . . . The



situation here is delicate. Watch what happens here. I am still groping but there is no despair in me.”<sup>6</sup>

From the general, his spiritual homing instinct again reverted to the particular—lack of harmony in his own entourage and the atmosphere of bickering and petty intrigue that had of late grown up around him. On the day of his departure from Srirampur, he woke up at 2 a.m. once more to ask himself the question: “Why does it not work?” Ahimsa could not be good only in parts—ineffective in its immediate neighbourhood and effective elsewhere. He woke up Manu, too, and told her to remain alert and wide-awake all the time in view of the ordeal that lay ahead of them. “Don’t you see, there is a clique forming here?” he remarked to me when I saw him a few days later. Referring to the atmosphere around him, he muttered to himself: “There must be some serious flaw deep down in me which I am unable to discover. . . . Where could I have missed my way? There must be something terribly lacking in my Ahimsa and faith which is responsible for all this.”<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

The village of Srirampur and its environs were beginning to stir into new life when on the morning of the 2nd January, 1947, winding up his camp Gandhiji set out on his long trek. The rice crop had recently been harvested and the paddy fields lay bare. All through the way the party kept singing Ramadhun. The whole countryside was astir. On either side of the way village folk from both the communities stood lined up to have a look at the Mahatma as he passed by. “An old man of seventy-eight with a bamboo stick marches in brisk pace,” wrote an eye-witness, “and whoever comes and greets gets always a smiling response.”<sup>8</sup>

Sixteen years ago, he had similarly set out on foot on his historic Salt March, to the sea, with a party of seventy-nine. He then used to walk eight to ten miles daily and outpaced many a youngster without being tired. The physical frame had since been worn out by many a long fast and a decade and a half of ceaseless toil; but the spirit within burnt stronger than ever. In those days people in their thousands used to join him in his march and were welcome; this time he let it be known to all concerned that he wanted no other companion but God in his pilgrimage.

From sorrowful Srirampur to eager, expectant Chandipur was three miles. He reached there at 8.50 a.m. On the way he stopped at two devastated *badis*, both of them belonging to political opponents; one was that of an old revolutionary, the other a local Muslim’s. Abdullah, the Superintendent of Police, who had developed a deep attachment for Gandhiji and had become almost a member of the family, accompanied him from Srirampur to Chandipur. A party of twenty military-police carrying guns walked in front. The first thing Gandhiji said to Abdullah on reaching Chandipur was that he did not



like the armed police accompanying him. "I appreciate the vigilance with which the Bengal Government are trying to protect me but I need no other protection save God's."

The evening prayer was held at a rather early hour at 4.30 to enable the women who had come to attend the prayer meeting from the neighbouring village to return to their homes before dark. Hamiduddin, the Parliamentary Secretary, had in the course of his statement from Calcutta (see page 105) among other things said that the attendance of both Hindus and Muslims in Gandhiji's prayer meetings was dwindling, and one day he would be left without anybody to listen to him at all. Referring to it, Gandhiji remarked that even if that happened it would be no reason for him to give up his mission in despair. He would then roam from village to village, teach the villagers how to clean their tanks and to practise arts and crafts that would enrich their lives. Such labour of love unselfishly undertaken was bound ultimately to overcome all prejudice. "The particular object-lessons which I propose to give you during my tour are how you can keep the village water and yourself clean; what use you can make of the earth, of which your bodies are made; how you can obtain the life-force from the infinite sky over your heads; how you can reinforce your vital-energy from air which surrounds you; and how you can make proper use of sunlight. In other words, I shall try to teach you how we can convert our impoverished country into a land of gold by making right use of the various elements around us."<sup>9</sup>

Where was the necessity for his going all over Noakhali in order to establish communal harmony? he was asked. And where was the need for the Sikhs to go with him? Answering these questions Gandhiji said that his object being to convince people that he bore no ill will to anyone he could do that only by living and moving amongst those who distrusted him. As for the Sikhs, they had come with the permission of the Government, not to pick up quarrels—they had come even without their *kirpans*—but to render service to both the communities. "On what ground can I send away such friends? . . . If I did, I would fall in my own estimation and prove myself a coward. . . . I request you to trust these people . . . and accept their services. . . . God has blessed them with physical strength as well as faith."<sup>10</sup>

\* \* \*

Gandhiji halted at Chandipur for five days. The evacuees had by now begun to return to their homes in fairly large numbers and the question of their rehabilitation was becoming more and more acute. Mr. McInerny, the District Magistrate, had remarked at Gandhiji's first meeting with the refugees at Dattapara, in the second week of November, that while food, clothing, shelter and medical relief were undoubtedly the first primary requirements after a cataclysm, natural or man-made, even more important than these was courage. Nothing



could be, therefore, more opportune than Gandhiji's presence in that juncture in Noakhali. Gandhiji could not restore to the refugees what they had lost but he could give them the strength to face the vicissitudes of life with courage, faith and hope. That called for special effort and a new approach to the problem of rehabilitation.

Most touching was the case of a blind woman, who had lost her all. She wanted Gandhiji's *darshan*! What consolation could he give her? He told her that what one sees with the inner eye is more real than what one sees with the physical. (He had experimented with that *sadhana*, too). The old woman went back comforted. In that instant she had her *darshan*!

In one of his post-prayer addresses, Gandhiji likened his venture in Noakhali to a pilgrimage. In ancient days pilgrimages were performed on foot. The most sacred places were situated at the far and, in those days, inaccessible ends of India. The journey to them was long and arduous. During the journey the pilgrims walked bare-footed, put themselves under rigorous vows and practised austerity. These, along with the hardships of the journey, accepted in faith, constituted the purifying penance. The merit of the pilgrimage lay in self-purification. God did not reside in any particular place to the exclusion of another, said Gandhiji, but in the hearts of men. There was, therefore, no special merit in visiting a place of pilgrimage as such. But if one undertook a pilgrimage in the right spirit and with full observance of all the rules, it ought to make one purer and purer in heart every day. In the context of his mission in Noakhali this meant that all impurities should be removed from their hearts, "most of all the impurity styled fear". If those who had suffered during the riots could shed fear they would want not punishment or revenge but the conversion of their assailants. By cultivating in themselves the spirit of fearlessness and forgiveness, therefore, they could all join him in his pilgrimage without leaving their homes. He invited them all thus to join him. This meant all-round purification, not only of the Hindus and the Muslims of Noakhali but of all-India. To his Prodigal Son Harilal, who had left him, he sorrowfully wrote: "How delighted I shall be to find that you have turned over a new leaf! Just think of the affection I have lavished upon you! Mine is an arduous pilgrimage. I invite you to join in it if you can. . . . If you purify yourself, no matter where you are, you will have fully shared it."<sup>11</sup> Then referring to his theory that spiritual rebirth is inevitably reflected in one's physical renovation, he added: "Take it on the authority of the *Bhagavata* that you will then also cease to look prematurely old as at present."

What did it matter if their houses had been burnt, and their property looted, he said to the riot-affected people, so long as they had the will and the determination to go forward and rebuild their lives on the foundation of labour, courageously and joyfully undertaken for



themselves and the nation? Rehabilitation meant to Gandhiji not merely economic rehabilitation but moral and spiritual rehabilitation as well. They had to be spiritually reborn. And not only they but their oppressors, too. It had been brought to his notice that some culprits who were believed to have taken part in the riots were fleeing from place to place for fear of arrest. It was cowardly, he told them, to flee like that. They should make a clean confession and face the punishment, if there was any. Such punishment nobly borne ceased to be punishment but became purification; it elevated man. To the sufferers, his advice was that they should forget all about the culprits, return to their homes and face all risks. Finally, he told them, if both Hindus and Muslims learnt to tackle properly the little things of their daily life about which he had come to speak to them, it would change the face of the country and create a heaven out of the pitiable condition in which they all lived and suffered.

And even while he was energetically pursuing his mission of peace in Noakhali, where the Hindus were the victims, his heart ached no less for the Muslims of Bihar. In answer to his inquiries a Minister from Bihar with several representative officials was sent by the Bihar Government to apprise him of the situation in Bihar. They admitted to him that brutal things had happened in the course of the disturbances. They were prepared, they said, to bear all justifiable censure on that account. But they totally denied the charge of complicity. Gandhiji reassured the Muslims at one of his prayer meetings that he would not rest until he was satisfied personally that everything that was humanly possible for the rehabilitation of the riot victims and their proper treatment by the majority community was done by the Bihar Government.

Government help in Noakhali was altogether insufficient even for the erection of temporary shelters. Should the refugees accept such help? Gandhiji was asked at one of his meetings. He told them that if their basic requirements were not covered by the proposed Government grants, they should refuse to accept them but still return to their homes even if it meant no cover over their heads. This, however, had to be done not in anger but in a sportsmanlike spirit.

Supposing Government as well as private relief was stopped, what should the refugees do?

“In that case, social workers should first make a systematic, detailed inquiry on the spot as to what occupations could be undertaken in each village. They should then proceed to organise those occupations on a cooperative basis.”

“What should be done to appease the aggressive mentality of the majority community?”

The word “appeasement” had come to have a bad odour, replied Gandhiji. In no case should there be any appeasement at the cost of honour. The real and only appeasement was to do what was right



at any cost. Blow for blow was a played out game. Non-violence of the brave was the real approach to the problem.

## 2

In Noakhali nature is kind. The earth under the feet is soft and soothing to the touch. There are no sharp stones or thorns to prick bare feet. Even the stubble in the harvested fields is soft as silk. Gandhiji had very delicate feet. He took extraordinary care of them. Even so he was foot-sore when he arrived at Chandipur. But he decided that he would wear no sandals during the rest of his wanderings; it would be an act of irreverence on his part to tread the ground which had been hallowed by the innocent sufferings of poor men and women, with shoes on.

Manu used to be in charge of his travelling kit and papers. He let her look after it as a part of her training. But for himself, he resolved that he would hold nobody responsible if anything went wrong. So, he personally saw to it that the kit was properly packed and ready at the right time.

The kit included practically everything he required from pen, pencil and paper to needle and sewing thread for mending clothes; a few cooking-pots, an earthen bowl and a wooden spoon, a galvanised iron bucket for bath, a commode, a hand-basin, and soap; and last but not least spinning-wheel and its accessories. There were, besides, files, papers and a few books. A portable typewriter completed the office equipment. The books carried in the bag included:

1. The Sayings of Muhammad:
2. Glances at Islam:
3. The World Bible:
4. The Book of Daily Thoughts and Prayer:
5. Practice and Precepts of Jesus:
6. A Book of Jewish Thoughts:
7. Constructive Programme : Its Meaning and Place:
8. Dhammapada:
9. Thousand Names of Rama:
10. Uttaragita:
11. Sukhamani Saheb (the Sikh Scripture):
12. Shri Ramacharitamanas:
13. Discovery of India:
14. Ashram Bhajanavali:
15. Gitanjali:
16. Elementary Bengali Reader:
17. Bengali Teacher:
18. Bengali-Hindi Teacher:



19. Hindi-Bangla Sikshak:

20. Urdu Reader:

21. Bhagavad Gita:

On the 7th January, his last night at Chandipur, he woke up at 2 a.m. and with his characteristic thoroughness inquired to make sure if his instructions for the march had all been carried out. At the morning prayer he asked for his favourite *Vaishnavajana* hymn to be sung with this variation that for *Vaishnava-jana* in the refrain *Muslim-jana*, *Parsi-jana*, and *Christian-jana* were to be substituted by turns as a mark of identification with the followers of all faiths.

The disc of the rising sun had just begun to peer above the horizon when at half-past seven he set out on his journey with the singing of Poet Tagore's celebrated song:

Walk Alone.

If they answer not to thy call, walk alone;

If they are afraid and cower mutely facing  
the wall,

O thou of evil luck,

Open thy mind and speak out alone.

If they turn away and desert you when  
crossing the wilderness,

O thou of evil luck,

trample the thorns under thy tread,  
and along the blood-lined track travel  
alone.

If they do not hold up the light  
when the night is troubled with storm,

O thou of evil luck,

with the thunder-flame of pain ignite  
thine own heart

and let it burn alone.

The singing of one variation after another of Ramadhun was kept up all along the way. The troupe of singers of devotional songs wanted to be allowed to accompany him throughout his tour. He dissuaded them saying, he did not want to give to his pilgrimage, in the eyes of the local Muslims, the appearance of a triumphal march. The only triumph he craved for was that over his own lower self and over the hearts of men.

The route lay through a landscape of enchanting beauty. A narrow, winding footpath, over which two persons could hardly walk abreast, wound sinuously through colonnades of stately palms, whose straight-growing stems and drooping branches were reflected in the glassy surface of the tanks by the side of which they grew. A red dawn filled the sky, bathing in its crimson glow the tops of the darkling woods and the



pool-dotted carpet of the greenery below. At 9 o'clock, the party reached Mashimpur. Satish Chandra Das Gupta had put up for Gandhiji's accommodation a small, neat-looking, comfortable hut. It was made of light detachable panels of split bamboo, cane and grass, with lovely little windows, complete with shutters and racks to keep pots and other things upon. Two small annexes served as the lavatory and the massage room respectively. A small tricolour fluttered overhead. But Gandhiji pronounced the hut to be "palatial". It did not accord with his role as a homeless wanderer. It had be better utilised as a travelling dispensary for the poor. "I cannot afford the luxury of having a folding hut being carried from place to place for my use during the journey," he said to Satish Das Gupta. "I can make myself comfortable anywhere and everywhere. If there is no-one to receive me under his roof, I shall be happy to rest under the hospitable shade of a tree."

To find suitable accommodation for Gandhiji everyday during his one-day one-village tour was a problem. Satish Das Gupta thought, he could get round it by the device of the portable hut. But what use was accommodation if the hearts were shut? So Gandhiji declined the use of the folding hut and camped in a damp school-shed instead. And he gave instructions to his workers, too, that they must be content to subsist on whatever the family with which they stayed might provide. They must become one with them, never put on airs or give anyone the impression that they were there as their "protectors and benefactors".

At the evening prayer meeting a number of Muslims were also present. But as soon as Ramadhun began some of them walked out. It could not be for *namaz* as the sun was still shining. On inquiry Gandhiji learnt that they objected to the singing of Ramadhun. It saddened him that they could not tolerate God being remembered by any other name except Khuda or Allah, but he also felt glad that on the very first day of his journey he had a foretaste of the kind of resistance which he was to encounter in the course of his tour. In the course of his prayer discourse, he remarked that while he was very careful not to wound unnecessarily the susceptibility of anyone and had come to Noakhali to demonstrate his friendship for the Muslims by staying in their midst and serving them, he could not possibly give up Ramanama, which was food for his soul. It was the same Creator whom people worshipped through many tongues. Those who had walked out that evening had put themselves in the wrong and acted against the declared policy of the Muslim League. At the same time he warned the Hindus that Ramanama must not be sung in an aggressive spirit or by way of bravado to annoy the other community.

A piercing chill wind was blowing the next morning when Gandhiji reached the village of Fatehpur so that he could not have his usual brief nap during the massage. As Manu applied oil to his feet, she noticed that they were bleeding. Gandhiji's Muslim host at Fatehpur,



Maulvi Ibrahim, was a remarkable character in his own way. For the last fifty years he had been trying to induce the Muslims to take to various occupations which they had shunned as being "low class". They would not fish, so he took to fishing himself; they would not weave, he set up looms and succeeded in starting a weaving school which became quite popular. He and his people were all kindness and attention to Gandhiji during his stay.

The evening prayer at Fatehpur was attended by a large number of local Muslims. Gandhiji had earlier in the day inquired of Maulvi Ibrahim whether there would be any objection to the singing of Ramadhun at the prayer meeting. The Maulvi had replied that there would be no objection to the singing of Ramadhun but the Muslims might object to the tabor accompaniment, as the meeting would be held practically in front of a mosque.<sup>12</sup> "I at once saw the point and without a murmur told my companion, who was in charge of the tour, not to have any such accompaniment. The Muslim part of the audience sat throughout the whole meeting and Maulana Ibrahim . . . took part in it and spoke affectionately about the programme."<sup>13</sup>

While returning from the prayer meeting, Gandhiji was surprised to find G. D. Birla's domestic, Hariram, standing before him. He used to cook Gandhiji's food and attend on him at Birla House in Delhi. G. D. Birla had sent him to serve Gandhiji in Noakhali. But Gandhiji said, "No" and sent him back. It was all right for Birla brothers and friends like them to be concerned about him. But to accept such assistance was not compatible with his programme of penance in Noakhali.

At Daspara, the next village, a poor Muslim had at first consented to receive Gandhiji under his roof, but later excused himself on the ground that he could not run the risk of the resentment of his fellow Muslims. "I do not mention this by way of complaint," Gandhiji wrote in a letter to the Chief Minister that night. "I had expected varied experiences both pleasant and unpleasant. I bring this to your notice in order that if you feel like it, you might use your influence in the direction you may consider right as a man, not as the Chief Minister. You will readily do so if you realise that I am engaged in a purely peace mission and as an equal friend of both the parties."<sup>14</sup>

How could he call upon others to cast away their arms when he himself moved under an armed escort? Gandhiji was asked at one of his prayer meetings at Chandipur. He replied that while it was true that he was seen moving under armed protection, he was really helpless in the matter. If the Bengal Government felt it to be their duty to keep police and the military to guard him, he could not prevent them. "Believe me or not, I can only declare that I own no protector but God. Let God who knows the hearts of men bear witness."<sup>15</sup> The issue continued to exercise his mind. At the village of Daspara, there were not more than half a dozen Muslims present at the evening prayer meeting.



Gandhiji was informed that the chief members of the Muslim community in the village had left their homes because of the fear of the military accompanying him. Some local Muslims sent him word that there could be no harmonious relations between the two communities so long as he moved under armed protection. Gandhiji did not like the presence of the military and the police any more than they, but he was not satisfied with their attitude either. In his after-prayer address he suggested that since the Government was guided by public opinion, it was for them (the local Muslims) to reassure the Bengal Ministry that they could possibly do no harm to a sojourner in their midst like him; the Ministry should, therefore, withdraw the military as its continued presence was a slur upon the local Muslims. On his part, nothing would please him better than if, as a result, the Ministry withdrew the armed police. For he would then be able to meet everybody without any kind of barrier interposed between them. To Shaheed Suhrawardy he wrote:

All my attempt at bringing about real friendship between the two communities must fail so long as I go about fully protected by armed police or military....The fright of the military keeps them from coming to me and asking all sorts of questions for the resolution of their doubts. I do see some force in their argument. There will be none if either community was really brave. Unfortunately both lack this very necessary humane quality. I would, therefore, like you to reconsider the position and, if you feel convinced, to withdraw this escort. I do not need it. I even feel embarrassed and it certainly interferes with my *sadhana*. If you think that a firm and unequivocal written absolution from me will solve your difficulty, I would be quite prepared to consider any draft that you may send me for signature. Failing that, I suggest your making a declaration that on a satisfactory assurance being given to you by the Muslims in the area through which I may pass regarding my safety, you will withdraw the escort. If this happens, it will be a dignified procedure. I will certainly appreciate it and it will produce a good effect all round.<sup>16</sup>

The way to Jagatpur had been swept clean by workers assisted by some local people. But some Muslims had fouled it overnight by scattering cow-dung and excreta over it! When Gandhiji's attention was drawn to it he remarked: "I like it. It does me no harm and it helps them let off pent up steam!" This kind of "welcome" was to be his lot fairly often during his pilgrimage.

There was a women's meeting in the afternoon at Jagatpur. One of the women came with the half-charred thigh-bone of her murdered husband, which she carried with her as a sacred relic. Gandhiji told her that he did not like identification of the departed with their perishable remains and persuaded her to throw it away. Some of the women shed tears as they narrated their woeful tales. Gandhiji consoled them by pointing out to them the futility of grieving since no amount of sorrowing could bring back the dead to life. He recommended to them Ramanama



as the one infallible panacea for all suffering and sorrow. There was nothing else he could offer them. There was something compelling in his unearthly composure and imperturbability. It had a strangely soothing and invigorating effect upon the sorrowing women which no words of pity or sympathy could have had.

A group of Muslims tried to engage him in a disputation. But he declined to pick up the gauntlet, saying his object in Noakhali was to speak through his works rather than words. He did not mind owning defeat in argument so long as he could hold his own in acts of service. In this he was not going to take defeat.

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Nothing came out of Gandhiji's request to the Chief Minister to withdraw the military escort. It called for a complete change of heart and an all-out effort on the part of the Government to mobilise local Muslim opinion so as to provide an effective substitute for the armed escort. But the Bengal Premier was not yet ready for it. Much travail was necessary before that stage could be reached.

"I see nothing but darkness all around me," remarked Gandhiji pensively. "Whichever way you turn, you meet with untruth. Concord and peace are nowhere to be found. It is through this that I have to cut my way. How far I shall succeed, I do not know. It astonishes me how God is sustaining me through all this. Just think of it, I go to bed at 10 or 11 at night, get up at 2 a.m., go through the day's march at my age without fatigue and work round-the-clock without a breakdown!"<sup>17</sup>

As he contemplated the scene around him, once more the feeling came upon him that there was not likely to be an early end of his mission in Noakhali. "The signs are all against it," he remarked. To be able to command heart unity between Hindu and Muslim, he would have to make still further progress. Ramanama would have to penetrate yet deeper into his heart.

### 3

Gandhiji had been up since 2 o'clock and kept busy with his work almost till the last moment on the morning of his departure for Lamchar on the 11th January. A difficult *shanko* had to be crossed on the way. When he reached Lamchar, it was late. A large number of local Muslims, including some Muslim women and children, were waiting for him at a crossing. They welcomed him with coconuts. Some of them accompanied him to Lamchar.

Since Gandhiji had set out on his pilgrimage he had followed the practice of greeting every Muslim who met him on the way, irrespective of whether his greeting was returned or not. While proceeding to Lamchar he was for the first time gratified to find that all Muslims



returned his greetings. The Muslims not only of Noakhali but elsewhere, too, who had at first regarded his activity in Noakhali with distrust and suspicion, were now beginning to understand and appreciate its significance. One such Muslim young man, Joint Secretary of Varsity Muslim League, Aligarh, wrote to Gandhiji on the 6th January, 1947:

It is very kind of you that you are undertaking a Unity March in spite of such weak health. Pakistan or Akhand Hindustan, unity of the two major communities is the necessary condition for the achievement of our cherished goal—freedom. Those who are working for it are no doubt doing a yeoman service.

In the heart of my hearts I also desire to walk along with you and take practical lessons in unity making. Today there is a large number of people who do not think about Hindu-Muslim unity as something above party politics. This is the real hindrance in the achievement of unity. They do not know that they could achieve the friendship between Hindus and Mussalmans not by discussing Akhand Hindustan or Pakistan but something higher and noble, i.e., freedom. One may not like Akhand Hindustan or Pakistan but everybody should certainly desire the freedom of this subcontinent.

But Gandhiji's reply to this also was the same as to all such requests; he could not ask anyone to join him till he himself had seen the light.

While proceeding to the evening prayer at Lamchar, Gandhiji's attention was drawn to a heap of decomposed bodies that had been recovered from a tank. They were bodies mostly of persons who were killed during the disturbances at Karpara. The fact of their having been there was well known. But it was mentioned only in whispers. Gandhiji's arrival lent courage to the local people and they gave information to the police which led to their recovery. Gandhiji hardly took any interest in the ghastly find. On being asked if he would like to have a closer look at the corpses, he said: "It is useless to think about those that are dead. What we must see to is that they do not die like that in future." He was, however, very keenly interested to know the personal history of the people who had died courageously, preferring death to cowardice or conversion. Two had died of gun-shot wounds, fighting. The other two were *vaishnavas* with no earthly possessions. One of them being asked to accept Islam on pain of death refused saying, "This tongue of mine has not taken *Harinama* in vain." The temple in which he officiated was set on fire. He perished without attempting to come out. The other was struck down by a sharp weapon when he refused to change his faith.

Addressing the evening prayer gathering, Gandhiji expressed the hope that out of the ashes of the old, a new and better social order would emerge, based on economic justice and respect for human values. He expatiated on India's village economy in pre-British days as a binding force that held the various communities together in a joint cooperative



effort. There was a time when every village had its full complement of artisans, serving the farmer. The latter was the centre of gravity of the village economy. Payment was made in kind and production was in conformity with the needs of the people. Different occupations were knit together by a bond of inter-dependence and constituted an integrated whole. *Under its dispensation all communities shared to the fullest extent; nobody could go without food, shelter and clothing.* It was the first duty of the Government to help restore that system by providing artisans, whose life had been dislocated, with houses and implements and the raw material needed for plying their crafts. A new bond of cooperation would thus once again be established among the various people engaged in different occupations in the village, who were at present living a life uncoordinated with one another's or with the neighbouring villages.

Addressing the refugees, he went on to say that he had been asking men to be courageous. That did not merely mean the courage to face the ruffians. The courage he wanted them to cultivate was of a higher order. The inhabitants of the district who had gone through such bitter experience must now brace themselves to face the hardships of a complete economic reorganisation of life, wherever it had become inevitable.

During his visit to the residence of one of the riot-victims, Gandhiji was greeted by the owner of the house with the remark that so long they had worshipped images of stone, but now they beheld before them a god in human form! Gandhiji, who disliked personal deification in any form, gently snubbed him saying that stone gods were anyday better than human for they at least did not do any mischief!

A number of workers met Gandhiji the next day at Karpara, Sushila Pai's centre, and asked him how they should proceed to make life livable for the people after the recent holocaust. Gandhiji gave the first place in order of importance to a supply of clean drinking water and commended to them the example of the military in that regard. He suggested three simple, inexpensive methods by which clean water could be insured to the villagers, namely, first, by sinking water-holes some distance from the tanks but at a level not higher than the tanks. The water from the tanks would percolate through the mud-bed into the water-holes, purified — the mud-bed acting as a natural filter; secondly, by installing artificial home-made sand and charcoal filters in each household, and thirdly, by sinking tube-wells, wherever possible. The problem of devising a simple, inexpensive filter for corporate use was entrusted to Satish Chandra Das Gupta, who in his camp-workshop at Kazirkhil constructed an ingenious contraption costing not more than fifty rupees and capable of meeting the requirements of about 25 families.

Muslims came out in fairly large numbers to meet Gandhiji at Shahpur — the next halt — and were also present during the prayer. But they remained silent during the Ramadhun. Many of the Hindus, too, refrained from taking part in the prayer though they were present



in the prayer meeting. Was it due to the fear of the Muslims which even Gandhiji's presence could not overcome? Probing into the root-cause of the distemper from which India was suffering and of which Noakhali was a symptom, Gandhiji remarked in the course of his address that it was lack of real education, or rather miseducation of the people. He did not know any cure for it except *a gigantic effort in right education on a mass scale. And that could be done best through the propagation of simple handicrafts and industries on a cooperative basis.* It would help as nothing else to drive away unemployment, poverty and ignorance and inculcate upon the people a sense of interdependence and community of interests.

It took Gandhiji nearly 85 minutes next morning to reach Bhatialpur. On the way he visited the residences of four Muslims including the one where I had my first misadventure on arrival in that area. Two of these belonged to noted criminals. At the third place the Muslim owner asked Gandhiji to send Manu and Sushila to meet the women in the *zenana* as they could not come out of their *purda*. Gandhiji asked him if there would be any objection to his meeting them. The Muslim friend at first hesitated but in the end consented and even had a photograph taken of the family group with Gandhiji in their midst!

A local peace committee composed of Muslims and Hindus had been formed at Bhatialpur. The Muslim members of the committee had signed a manifesto deploring and condemning what had taken place and offering to give every help to enable those who had been forced to leave the place to return and be rehabilitated in their original homes. In pursuance of that pledge, the Muslim members of the committee had approached the looters and those who were in possession of the booty. But though a few minor items of looted property were offered to be returned, no substantial reparation was forthcoming owing, among other things, to the factions amongst the looters.

The temple in the *badi* where Gandhiji was to stay in Bhatialpur had been destroyed during the disturbances and the *samadh*s over the ashes of the departed ones of the family had been demolished and altered so as to look like Muslim graves. Some members of the committee volunteered to help in the renovation of the *samadh*s in anticipation of Gandhiji's visit. They later met Gandhiji, when he performed the ceremony of reinstalling the deity in the family temple, and in his presence repeated their pledge to protect with their lives the lives, property, honour and religion of their Hindu brethren in future. This was the first event of its kind in Noakhali since the riots.

A group of Muslim young men, mostly students, saw Gandhiji during his evening walk and asked him several questions. One of them was: "Would it not be better to concede Pakistan and get freedom for the whole of India?"

"When you think of establishing Pakistan first," replied Gandhiji, "you think in terms of achieving it with the aid of a third power."



When I think of the freedom of India, I think in terms of getting it without any foreign aid, on the basis of our own inner strength. Once freedom is secured for the country as a whole we can decide about Pakistan or Akhand Hindustan."

"After the recent disturbances there is neither Pakistan nor peace. What is the solution?"

"That is exactly what I am in search of. As soon as it is discovered the world shall know."

At the prayer meeting Gandhiji spoke about the practice of observing *purda* among Muslim women and asked them to discard it as an outmoded custom. True *purda* was of the heart which constituted a woman's real protection. This was in consonance, too, he maintained, with the Prophet's teachings. For this piece of friendly advice given in the best of faith, he was treated to the choicest abuse by the Muslim divines and other Muslim reactionaries not only of Noakhali but from as far away as Bombay and Madras. His action was dubbed as an unwarranted intrusion on the part of an unbeliever, and an attempt to corrupt the Islamic tradition!

#### 4

A thick white mist hung over the dripping winter woods when Gandhiji resumed his march next morning for Narayanpur. Before taking leave of his hosts at Bhatialpur, Gandhiji once more visited the temple which he had reopened the previous day. The lady of the house was already there so rapt in her devotions as hardly to be aware of his presence. Softly he drew away on tip-toe so as not to disturb her.

At half-past eight the party reached Narayanpur, where, for the second time during his pilgrimage, a local Muslim welcomed Gandhiji under his roof. It was Gandhiji's practice on reaching his destination to wash his feet before sitting down to work. To clean his feet he used a piece of stone. That day it was not to be found among his things on arrival at Narayanpur. He had stopped at a weaver's hut on the way to have a warm foot-bath as his bare feet were numbed with cold. The stone must have been left there by Manu. But oversight in the performance of one's duty, however trivial, was, in Gandhiji's eyes, a "major error". She must go back and find it where she had lost it. The path was lonely and ran through a thick jungle, where even grown-up people often lost their way. There was the fear of ruffians, too. Trembling, she asked if she might take volunteers with her as escort. With affected sternness Gandhiji bade her go forth alone.

An old dame was the only member of the family present in the hut when she reached there. She had found the stone lying on the floor and flung it out. After some search it was found. The poor girl was weary and famished when she returned with the precious stone.



Placing it before Gandhiji she burst into tears. Gandhiji laughed. It was too much. Gandhiji noticed her annoyance and gently said to her: "I warned you on the day you came to me that to be with me in this *yajna* was no joke. You can still go back. Thanks to the stone, you had such an early opportunity to go through the test."

"Perhaps you feel like taking food now," he resumed. "You may. But if I were you, I would take only the milk of a green coconut and rest a while. What one really needs when one is tired is not food but rest." She appreciated the advice but for once let nature have its way and had a hearty meal!

In the evening, he again expatiated on the incident: "I tell the women of Noakhali to face all dangers without flinching. So, I said to myself, why should I not make a beginning with my own home? I knew better than you the danger. If some ruffian had carried you off and you had met your death courageously, my heart would have danced with joy. But I would have felt humiliated and unhappy if you had turned back or run away from danger out of timidity or fear. As I heard you sing day after day the song *Walk Alone*, I wondered within myself whether it was mere braggadocio. Today's incident should give you an idea how relentless I can be in putting to the test those I love most."<sup>18</sup>

Gandhiji's non-violence was no misty-eyed sentimentality. When the highest good of those under his care required him to be stern, he could be the most heartless of "tyrants". On one occasion when Manu was laid up with a bad cold, she asked him to wake her up when he wanted his spinning-wheel to be got ready for spinning. But he did not and set it up himself. "Do not think," he later explained to her, "it was out of pity for you. If you want to know how heartless I can be, make your body tough as steel. Have you ever seen a blacksmith at work? He takes a crude piece of iron, beats it on the anvil with vigorous hammer blows and turns it into a beautiful article of use. I can be as heartless as that blacksmith."

A couple of days later he decided, according to his practice, to put a young Muslim co-worker, who had joined him in his venture, through his initiation by asking him to take up kitchen work and latrine cleaning, beginning with the latter. The young man having never done scavenging before wrestled heroically but in vain with the rising revulsion against his new avocation. Manu was moved to compassion but wisely refrained from offering relief. When she narrated the incident to Gandhiji, he told her that she had done well in refraining or he would have taken her to task for it. "Such pity is no kindness at all but cruelty. To weaken this man's resolve by showing false pity when he was struggling to overcome his weakness would have been a distinct disservice to him. A surgeon who fights shy of performing an appendectomy, when a patient comes to him with a suppurating



appendix, sends his patient to certain death. He has to be prompt and ruthless if he is to save the patient's life. I am a surgeon of that type."

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Gandhiji bade goodbye to his Muslim host at Narayanpur in the Muslim style with a *Khuda hafiz* ("May God protect you"). The local Muslims gave him a send-off with *namaskar* (Hindu form of greeting) which he returned with *salam* (Muslim greeting).

The route to Ramdevpur-Dasgharia was comparatively long. Kanu Gandhi was stationed here. Groups of Muslims stood waiting for Gandhiji at various points on the wayside. At some places people had erected green arches of welcome. Women received him with the picturesque ceremony of *arati* by encircling his head with lights, and put the customary auspicious red mark on his forehead. The Muslim estate manager of Surendra Nath Basu, the rich Hindu landlord, who had been murdered during the disturbances, welcomed him with fruit. Gandhiji distributed the fruit to the children of both the communities saying, "It is your love I need most".

The Muslim elders of a household at Narayanpur had asked Gandhiji to meet the women in the *zenana* but the latter would not come out of their seclusion. Gandhiji thereupon told the Hindu women of the locality that since the Muslim women were chary of coming out in the open owing to their social and educational backwardness, it was for the Hindu women, who were more advanced in that respect, to seek them out and mix with them. The Hindu women were afraid of the Muslims. Gandhiji told them that if they really felt for the Muslim women, they should be able to overcome the latter's diffidence and shed their own; love was incompatible with fear.

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Ever since Gandhiji's arrival in Noakhali, the Muslims had been demanding the release of Mian Saheb Ghulam Sarwar. No Muslim or Hindu dared openly oppose that demand though in confidence the Hindus and even some Muslims spoke quite differently. It was a measure of the awe which the Fuehrer inspired even from prison. As a matter of fact though he himself was in the lockup, the Mian Saheb's organisation was briskly at work. Gandhiji had seen evidences of it at Shahpur and other places. Dr. Amiya Chakravarty had seen him in the lockup and found him wholly unrepentant. In a letter to Gandhiji after the visit, Amiya wrote: "he would not face any moral issue . . . though in course of his conversation he made some astonishing partial disclosures. . . . He made certain most heinous remarks about Hindu women of Noakhali and about . . . large numbers of educated and influential Hindus being quite alive and well in Noakhali district — insinuations carrying direct intention of slander and threat. . . . There were other hints."



In pursuance of the agitation for the release of Ghulam Sarwar, a deputation of twelve Muslims came to see Gandhiji at Ramdevpur with the stock argument: Nothing much had happened in Noakhali. If Mian Saheb was released, he would bring "real peace" to the neighbourhood. Gandhiji, who in his "terrible meek" way could be quite tough with the toughs, told them that he was not quite so sure of that after the authoritative reports which he had received about Ghulam Sarwar's attitude. Nor could he endorse the opinion that nothing "much" had happened when he was daily having evidence of the havoc that had been wrought.

How did he expect, Gandhiji was asked, that friendly relations could be established between the two communities when the Hindus continued to agitate for the arrest and trial of the offenders? As a reformer, Gandhiji answered, he was not interested in getting even a murderer punished. He substituted the penalty of conscience for the penalty of law. But Government stood on a different footing. It could not let known offenders and those who were guilty of heinous crimes go unpunished unless there was an adequate guarantee that such things would not happen again. Therefore, so long as the Muslim opinion in Noakhali did not insist upon the guilty parties disclosing themselves, he did not see how one could oppose the demand for their prosecution. It was, therefore, for the awakened Muslim public opinion to assert itself and bring to book the offenders before the court of public opinion. Such purging before the court of public opinion was infinitely superior to a trial before the court of law. If the offenders showed contrition by returning the looted property and reassuring those against whom offences had been committed, and the local Muslims stood surety for the future good behaviour of the offenders, it might be possible to drop the prosecutions. The onus rested on the offenders and their sympathisers.

"Why cannot the two leaders — Jinnah and Gandhi — settle it between themselves? Then there would be peace in the country. In the reverse, how can there be peace in the country or in Noakhali when there is none at the Centre?" Gandhiji was asked at more than one place. His reply was that a leader was made by his followers. If they really desired neighbourliness and peace, their desire would be reflected by the leaders. If, however, by peace at the Centre they meant a formal pact between the Congress and the Muslim League, it was unnecessary since, so far as he knew, neither the President of the Congress nor the Muslim League President wanted discord between the two communities. They had their political quarrel but the disturbances in India, whether in Bengal, Bihar or elsewhere were sheer barbarism and hindered political progress all round. While, therefore, he admitted that Hindu-Muslim unity could not be sustained in the face of the Congress-League differences, if apart from party politics, Hindus and Muslims in Noakhali acted together as real friends, they could set an example to the League and



the Congress. His advice to them, therefore, was to let the political quarrel be confined to the politicians at the top; it would be a disaster if they allowed it to permeate the villages. He reiterated his conviction that if he could realise unadulterated Ahimsa in his own person, it must result in establishing true heart-unity between the Hindus and Muslims; it was for those who thought like him to help and cooperate in the fruition of his effort.

As Gandhiji saw it, the problem not only in India but all over the world was that people allowed themselves to be led away by catch-words and slogans. In the prevailing confusion about 'isms they quarrelled over shadows and let the substance slip through their fingers. If he could demonstrate in Noakhali that after all it was the daily things of life that mattered most — whether it was Pakistan or Akhand Hindustan — and that the masses could solve them to their satisfaction and become masters of their destiny by dint of their own industry, intelligence, power of combination and mutual cooperation, irrespective of any 'ism, its effect would be felt not merely in Noakhali but over the whole of India, and might even point the way to the future peace of the world.



## CHAPTER VIII

### BITTER AND SWEET

#### 1

EVEN FOR Noakhali it had been an exceptionally dewy night and the narrow footpath by which Gandhiji was to proceed had been rendered extremely slippery when on the morning of the 19th January he left Badalkot for Atakora. Twice Col. Jiwan Singh, accustomed to difficult marches, lost his foothold and rolled over. Everybody enjoyed the fun as his giant figure sprawled at full length on the ground. Laughingly Gandhiji offered him the end of his walking stick to pull himself up the slippery slope!

The footpath was narrow so that the party could walk on it only in single file. All of a sudden the column came to a dead-stop. Gandhiji was removing the excreta from the footpath with the help of some dry leaves! The footpath had again been dirtied by some Muslim urchins.

"Why did you not let me do it? Why do you put us to shame like this?" Manu asked.

Gandhiji laughed: "You little know the joy it gives me to do such things."

Lots of village people had stood complacently by while Gandhiji was engaged in cleaning the footpath. Manu felt annoyed. Gandhiji noticed her annoyance. "You will see," he remarked, "from tomorrow they won't let me clean the footpath myself. I have today given them an object-lesson. They now see that scavenging is not derogatory."

"I have no doubt, they will clean the footpath tomorrow," Manu replied. "But suppose they give it up as soon as your back is turned, as very likely they will, what then?"

"I will send you out for inspection. If the path is still dirty, I shall clean it myself. Cleaning up, in the widest sense of the term, is my profession!"

Further down the road there was a Muslim primary school. Classes were being held in the open. Gandhiji wanted to meet the little boys and girls. But their Maulvi Saheb ordered them away. In vain Gandhiji tried to beckon them back. They would not even take his *salam*. With a sigh he passed on.

Atakora was only two miles from Badalkot. But it took a whole hour to reach it. A very old couple lived in its neighbourhood. They were anxious to meet Gandhiji but were too infirm to walk that distance.



When Gandhiji came to know of it, he said he would visit them in their hut. He went there in the evening. The old man was deaf. Gandhiji affectionately patted him on the cheek as he came up. The old woman, too, came with two necklaces of camphor-beads. She handed one of them to her old man, keeping to herself the other to put round Gandhiji's neck. As the old man came up with his necklace, Gandhiji took it out of his hands and put it round the old man's neck instead — the latter being his senior in years! The old dame then came up, put the other necklace round Gandhiji's neck, took both his hands in hers, and reverentially pressed them against her eyes and face and whole body for his blessings. Her gnarled hands and whole body shook with ecstasy as she did so. Gandhiji was deeply moved. His eyes glistened and his countenance beamed with tender affection. "When two cronies meet, there is unsurpassable joy," he remarked.

The old couple pressed him to take the sweet water of two green coconuts which they had hoarded, heaven knows for how long. Gandhiji had a taboo against taking any nourishment (and he placed coconut water in that category) after his last evening meal, which was generally before sunset. He had observed it religiously for over 25 years. But what were prescriptive rules before a devotion so rare! For once they were put aside. Gandhiji's "asceticism" was neither sour nor cramping nor fanatical. It was a means of service, joyous and joy-giving — never a kill-joy.

Before setting out the next day, Manu remembered Gandhiji's directions and went back to inspect the path which Gandhiji had cleaned on the previous day. It was as dirty as ever. She cleaned it herself. Other people seeing her do so joined and the whole thing was finished in less than fifteen minutes. When she mentioned it to Gandhiji, he said: "So, you have robbed me of merit today! How I would have loved to do it myself!" Reminiscently he proceeded: "In Kathiawad, too, people had this filthy habit. It was my ambition to eradicate the evil. But that was not to be. . . . Just as eating by proxy can give no satisfaction even so it is with cleanliness; one must do it oneself to realise the joy of it."

The fiery ordeal about which Gandhiji used to speak came to one of his co-workers sooner than anyone had expected. At Sirandi, Amtus Salam had been fasting against some local Muslims. It was the twenty-fifth day of her fast. She was a devout Muslim who never missed her yearly Ramzan fast nor slept without the Koran by her side, some portion of which she read every day. Hindu-Muslim unity had been the passion of her life ever since her childhood and she held her life as of no account in its pursuit. More than once she had risked it by rushing to danger-spots, during the communal rioting in Calcutta, Delhi and Dacca. Soon after her taking up station at Sirandi, a local Muslim solemnly told her that in that area there had not been any looting and challenged the local Hindus to contradict his statement. None of



them, of course, dared. But later when she visited the Hindu women in their homes, they told her a different story. At one place a Muslim lad from the neighbouring village of Shaktola had given out that one Abani Babu, a Hindu riot-sufferer in the village, would be killed like two members of his family, including his father, during the disturbances. Three *khadgas* (sacrificial swords) used during religious rituals belonging to the Hindus had been carried away by the Muslims and never returned. It was said that they had been used for killing and might again be so used if the latest threat materialised.

Amtus Salam visited the person who was in possession of two out of the three swords and demanded their return. He at first denied any knowledge whatever of the swords, then wobbled, and finally refused point-blank to return them, challenging her to do her worst and filthily abusing her into the bargain. He even uttered threats against those who had given out the information. What followed is best told in her own words:

“Beni Babu called a meeting of the local Muslims. . . . I sent for Hashmatulla also (whom she had known before). . . . He said the Muslims had decided in a meeting that unless the Kari (one who recites Koran) from Shaktola ordered them, the swords would not be returned. The Kari being sent for excused himself from coming on the ground that he had to attend a dinner. So I went to his place. Some Hindus accompanied me. Why had we come? he asked. No Hindu dared speak. I said, ‘Please return the swords to the owners.’ He was silent. I repeated my request. He said, ‘Let Hashmatulla come.’ . . . When Hashmatulla arrived . . . the Kari said he had tried to contact the person who had one of the swords in question but in vain. He had gone to some other place ‘to do business’. I said, ‘All right. Produce the swords within three days. Send someone after him. I shall pay the expenses.’ The Kari agreed. What about the other two swords? Hashmatulla said they were with Ashraf Ali but he would not give it without the Kari and the Kari had to attend a dinner. He said he would go to Ashraf Ali next day. I said, ‘You can go wherever you please. I won’t drink even water until the swords are found.’ . . . I then left the place. . . . Kari and Hashmatulla came in half an hour and went to Ashraf Ali. Ashraf Ali was getting ready for *namaz*. *Namaz* over he called us into his house and began to get ready his hubble-bubble. I said, ‘Hubble-bubble can wait. Let us talk of business first.’ But no, the hubble-bubble first. By the time he had finished with it, it was sundown. The whole company sat in silence. The Kari was silent, Hashmatulla was silent, the Hindus were silent. I was asked to speak. The Hindus joined in the request. I said, silence on my part was perhaps best. If I opened my lips, I would have to say things. At last I said, ‘The swords. Where are they?’ Ashraf Ali said, ‘Ask the Kari.’ The Kari said he did not know; he was absent when the sword was taken away; he had tried to search for it but without



success. I said, 'Well, leave it. What about the other two? They are with you.' Yes, he would return them, he replied sheepishly. He was holding them in trust, he had not stolen them. There were at least ten people who were party to it. The onus of returning lay upon them; moreover those for whom they were holding the swords in trust had not yet returned to the village. Who made them trustees? Had the owners come to deposit the swords with them for safe custody? No, they had taken charge of them when they had gone to the owners to save them and had since kept the swords with them. . . . Why had the swords not been returned even two months after the disturbances? Did not the owners ask for them? Yes, they had. Then? It was decided at a meeting to return them after some time. Why after some time? Were they in the meantime to be used for committing more murders? 'Do you take us for cut-throats—we, who protected and saved the Hindus?' 'I have seen with my own eyes,' I told them, 'how you protected them.' Could I dare to say that any looting had taken place? I answered, 'For that better see the *ejhars* (statements filed with the police).' At the mention of *ejhars* he became furious. I said, 'You can't browbeat me. Better think of God's wrath on the judgment day. It cannot be far off; you have one foot already in the grave.' He was silent. The Hindus, too, plucked up courage. . . . Noticing the change Ashraf Ali said, 'You need not press the point further. I have understood. One sword is with me. The other also is in this very village, that is what I had told you. My son will presently come and produce it.' I said, 'You shall have to produce both. Better find out the other also, wherever it is.' . . . Ashraf Ali . . . went out into the village. . . . He returned shouting excitedly: 'Hindus, whom I saved, are today filing complaints against me. Let them do their worst. . . . I swear they won't be able to live here in peace after this. I shall not return the sword till I have seen for myself what they have said in their *ejhars*.' I tried to pacify him. To file a complaint was not a crime. Were not those whose homes had been looted entitled even to lodge a complaint? He asked me to shut up. 'Who are you to interfere? You are inciting the Hindus against us under the cover of championing their cause.' The Hindus and Muslims tried to calm him. How could the *ejhar* stand in the way of returning to the owners what, he had said, he was holding in trust? But Ashraf Ali went on angrily shouting, 'No, I shall never return the swords. At any rate not while she is here. . . . She has come here to threaten me. I shall show her.' ”<sup>1</sup>

What was she to do? Here were people who had been oppressed by her co-religionists. She had made herself surety for their safety. On the strength of her assurance they had returned to their homes and now they were being threatened under her very eyes for having confided their woes to her. She resolved there and then to abstain from all food and even water till the miscreants showed a change of heart and in token returned the swords they had stolen. It had an immediate effect.



The local Hindus and Muslims conferred together and as a result two of the three swords were returned. The third one could not be traced. The person who was alleged to be in possession of it absconded. Amtus Salam decided to go on fast once more and give up even drinking water. But she saw her mistake and corrected it when Gandhiji wrote to her: "It smacks of impatience. You want to take the law into your own hand and dictate terms to Lord God Himself instead of submitting to the full agony of a prolonged fast."

This time she was met by a stone wall. The police officials declared their helplessness in the matter. They even accused her of "obstinacy" and "wilfulness" in making a major issue out of a trifle. Gandhiji told the police officials concerned that they should do just what their duty demanded and nothing more. "If she is obstinate and dies let her die and die disgraced. If she is right and the right is not vindicated in her lifetime, death will be a fit atonement."<sup>2</sup>

And so the fast continued. It could be happily terminated only by the discovery of the missing weapon and all that that discovery implied. She had begun her fast with high temperature and a cough. These had persisted for twelve days and then subsided. After that though life ebbed away slowly, she was cheerful and at peace, comforted by the non-stop recitation of the Gita and the Koran by her bedside.

A large gathering of local Muslims met Gandhiji at Sirandi on the day of his arrival and told him that they had tried their utmost to recover the sword but had failed. They asked what assurance on their part would satisfy Amtus Salam and induce her to give up her fast. Gandhiji reflected. Two critical phases in fasting as Satyagraha are the beginning and the end. Any prolongation of the fast from obstinacy, pride or intoxication of success after its conditions have been essentially fulfilled can be as fatal to its success as its premature termination out of weakness or the will-to-believe that its terms have been fulfilled, when in fact they are not. The Superintendent of Police and some local Muslims had striven their utmost and failed to trace the missing sword. They were not sure even if it was any longer in existence or traceable. If Amtus Salam insisted on literal fulfilment of her condition before she gave up her fast, it was clear that, in the circumstances, she must die. That could not be the real object of her fast. The recovery of the missing sword was the symbol of something behind it, viz., unity and peace between the two communities. If, therefore, the Muslims gave an adequate guarantee in that regard, the object of her fast could be deemed to have been realised and she should break her fast. The local Muslims agreed to give the required guarantee. The draft was prepared by Gandhiji for their signatures. It was as follows:

With God as witness, we solemnly declare that we bear no antagonism towards the Hindus or members of any other community. To each one, to



whatever faith he might belong, his religion is as dear as Islam is to us. There can, therefore, be no question of interference by anybody in the observance of the religious practices of others. We understand that Bibi Amtus Salam's object is the establishment of Hindu-Muslim unity. The object is gained by the signing of this pledge. We wish, therefore, that she should give up her fast. We realise that if we are found to have acted with any mental reservations in this matter we shall have to face a fast on Gandhiji's part. Our endeavour for the recovery of the remaining sword shall continue.

The declaration was signed by eleven leading Muslims from four villages. The twelfth member, who had first spoken on behalf of the Muslim assembly, did not sign. He had gone away to "attend a meeting" several miles away! There was a report against him that he was responsible for the forcible conversion of many Hindus during the disturbances. Some of the Muslims argued that since the village he hailed from was not covered by the agreement, his signature was not necessary. But Gandhiji was firm on having his signature. If the report against him was true, it was necessary that he should show repentance for having been party to the forcible conversion of Hindus and give a satisfactory guarantee for the future. His signature was obtained the next morning.

Gandhiji explained to the Muslim elders that if the signatories failed to keep the spirit of the pledge, he would go on a fast. Supposing cases of theft continued to occur and the signatories were unable to prevent them, would that be an occasion for Gandhiji to undertake a fast? Could such "incidents" be regarded as being of a "communal" nature? Gandhiji explained that he would give the signatories every chance to vindicate their position before he took any serious step. At the same time he wanted them to understand that there was enough reason for holding the view that much that had happened during the disturbances and was even now happening in the way of petty thefts, etc., was definitely "communal" in character. (See Chapter III, Vol. III). If goondas could do what they liked with the Hindu minority without any serious effort being made by the Muslims to restrain them, it meant that they (the goondas) enjoyed the indirect support of their community. It was important, therefore, that the Muslims should prevent all such cases of theft and persecution and see to it that full justice was done wherever thefts, etc., occurred in spite of their effort.

Gandhiji explained the significance of the signed document to Amtus Salam and, after the recital of *Al-Fateha* by a Muslim gentleman, she broke her fast by taking three ounces of orange juice at Gandhiji's hands.

The third sword remained untraced. But the threats of assassination stopped. The malady was so deep and elusive and the falsehood so pervasive that it could not be tackled in any other way than through the medium of an all-purifying fast. Things were altogether different in and around Sirandi after that fast. It blew away like a whiff of fresh



air the musty charnel-house odours that had hung over the place ever since the riots, and in a small way became the starting point in the growth of a mutual relationship between the two communities based on courage, faith and hope.

## 2

Leaving Sirandi with a thanksgiving for the successful termination of Amtus Salam's fast, Gandhiji moved to Kethuri on the 22nd January. He was feeling fatigued after the strenuous physical and mental and, even more than that, the spiritual strain of the talks at Sirandi. The next morning while going through a sheaf of papers after the morning prayer, he dozed off with the papers in his hands. It was time to collect the kit for the journey. A large number of people were waiting outside. But Manu dared not remove the papers from his hands lest it should disturb him. In the result they started a few minutes late. It enabled Gandhiji to dwell upon another facet of Ahimsa. Every moment of one's time is a sacred trust from God to be used strictly in His service. "When people have been told we are to start at seven, it must be at the stroke of seven. Unpunctuality is sin."

During the march to Paniala — the next halt — Manu sang a new Ramadhun. The second verse of the modified version ran:

"Ishwar and Allah are thy names,  
Do thou, O Lord, grant right understanding to all men."

She sang it at the evening prayer, too; the entire audience joining. Years ago, as a little girl, she had heard it sung while attending a religious service in a Vaishnava temple in her home-town of Porbandar. It had remained buried in her memory ever since and had come back to her spontaneously that morning. She told Gandhiji the story. It stirred up early childhood memories in his mind. "That is how it used to be in olden days", he remarked. "The name of Allah came naturally to the lips even of orthodox Brahman priests. The present poisoned relationship between Hindus and Muslims is a recent excrescence. The more I see of the stiffening opposition around me, the firmer grows my faith in the Unseen Power. The spontaneous inspiration you had today to sing this Ramadhun is to me a sign of it."

In the prayer gathering there was a large number of people whose relatives had been murdered by the Muslims during the disturbances. Singing of Ramadhun in which God, who is the same for both Hindus and Muslims, is invoked to give right understanding to all, therefore, came very apposite and took on a new meaning and significance. Gandhiji gave instructions that it was to be sung during their pilgrimage every day thereafter.

After the prayer address at Paniala there was a barrage of questions



by a group of Muslim League hecklers: "You have said that the Muslim majority Provinces, if they choose, can realise Pakistan today. What do you mean by it?"

Gandhiji explained that since Jinnah had declared that in Pakistan the minorities would, if possible, have better treatment even than the Muslims, there would be no under-dog nor upper-dog; if the Muslim majority Provinces, where it was as good as Pakistan, became wholly independent of the British Power and realised that ideal set forth by Jinnah in practice, the whole of India would welcome such an order, no matter by what name it was called, and the whole of India would be Pakistan. "If Pakistan means anything else, I do not know, and if it does, it would make no appeal to my reason."

"How did your Ahimsa work in Bihar?"

"It did not work at all, it failed miserably. But if the reports received from responsible quarters are to be relied upon, the general population in Bihar has realised the seriousness of the crimes committed by large masses of Biharis in certain parts of the Province."

"Who saved Hindus and Hindu property in Noakhali if not the Muslims?"

"The question betrays subtle conceit. Repentance ought to be humble. If the mischief in Noakhali has not been worse than it actually was, it is not man but God who is to be thanked for it. At the same time, I am free and happy to admit that there were Muslims in Noakhali who gave protection to the Hindus."

\* \* \*

Gandhiji's presence in Noakhali converted it into a veritable sound-board which caught and amplified every political tremor or reverberation over the length and breadth of India. His advice to Assam to go out of the Section in the Constituent Assembly unless there was a guarantee that a constitution unacceptable to Assam's representatives would not be sought to be forced upon Assam by the representatives of the other Province in the Section (see page 123) had caused deep chagrin in the Muslim League ranks and its repercussion was felt in Noakhali, too. Gandhiji was asked how he could give that advice if his aim was Hindu-Muslim unity and how the Muslim League could join the Constituent Assembly after that. Gandhiji replied that he had given no advice to Assam beyond what was implied in the Cabinet Mission's plan and was inherent in the character and tradition of the Congress organisation. There was nothing in it that was incompatible with his aim of realising communal unity or that could make it impossible for the Muslim League to come into the Constituent Assembly. It was for the Congress and the League to come into the Constituent Assembly and appeal to the reason of the Provinces or groups by making their programme and policy intrinsically attractive.



Partly to relieve the pressure of over-population in some of the bordering districts in Bengal, but principally to alter the communal ratio of the population of Assam, the Muslim League had launched a large-scale "three-pronged invasion" of Assam by Muslim immigrants. Muslim League National Guards styling themselves as *Khilji Dastas* or Khilji columns were organised in batches of 17 and sent out in imitation of the military adventurer Bakhtiar Khilji, who was credited with the legendary exploit of having stormed Navadvip (present-day Nadia), the capital of Gaur (ancient Bengal), in the 13th century, with the help of 17 horsemen only, shouting Allah-o-Akbar. The *Khilji Dastas* took illegal possession of Government vacant lands in Assam and refused to be evicted. The Assam Government had naturally to set into motion the machinery of law and order. The decision to prevent encroachment on Government lands and to evict illegal trespassers had been taken by the Assam Government long before as a result of an agreement with Muhammad Sadullah, the leader of the Muslim League party in the Assam Legislative Assembly. It was purely an administrative issue. But it was given a communal complexion and exploited by the Muslim League to manufacture an "atrocities" outcry against the Congress Ministry in Assam. Gandhiji was challenged at Paniala to say why he was silent on the eviction of Muslims by the Assam Government and when he replied that illegal trespassers merely because they happened to be Muslims or Bengalis, could not claim exemption from the operation of the common law, this was made a grievance of and used as a propaganda point in the campaign of vilification against him.

Gandhiji held that social malaise is a manifestation of the evil within us just as physical epidemics are of the invisible pathogenic germs scattered by the carriers of contagion. To control the epidemic, we have to decontaminate the carriers of contagion. Similarly, to remove social ills we have to sterilise ourselves completely of the evil within us. When, therefore, we find that things are at sixes and sevens around us, said Gandhiji, we should look within ourselves for the cause, if we want to realise unadulterated non-violence in regard to the whole world. We shall then grow from perfection to perfection and will not be tempted to vent our wrath upon others. "Do you know my *vanar gurus*?" he remarked one day to one of his companions, referring to the symbolical image of three monkeys shown in characteristic poses, one covering his eyes, the other his ears and the third his mouth respectively with the palms of his hands to symbolise the three Buddhist commandments: "See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil." He used to call them his three *gurus* — teachers. "If someone should revile us," he went on to explain, "we should dance with joy. We should extract whatever is good or valuable in our opponent's criticism and forget the rest." And he recited the well-known lines of Dadu, the celebrated Indian devotee, of which he was very fond:



My reviler is my brother,  
 He serves me without any fee.  
 He injures himself but he saves others,  
 Long may he live — my reviler.

“Repetition of Ramanama is vain,” he added, “if it does not enable us to remain undisturbed in the midst of life’s storms. It is a test and criterion of our faith.

\* \* \*

In contrast with what had preceded and what followed, Muraim stood out as an oasis in a desert. The Maulvi, under whose roof Gandhiji stayed at Muraim, took him inside his house and introduced the ladies of the *zenana* to him. They greeted him with deep reverence. Noticing that some of them felt shy in his presence and even observed *purda*, the Maulvi gently rebuked them saying: “We are blessed today to have a man of God like him in our midst. Our community today suffers from the stigma of shedding the blood of our Hindu brethren. Mahatmaji has come to free us of that stain. It is absurd to observe *purda* in his purifying presence.”

At the evening prayer all the Hindus and Muslims joined in the singing of Ramadhun. “The credit of it all belongs to the Maulvi Saheb,” remarked Gandhiji. “It sustains my thesis that a single individual is enough to transform the atmosphere around him provided he is sincere and truthful.” If it was true for that village, why could it not be for the whole of Noakhali and even India?

Gandhiji’s good Muslim host at Muraim saw him off nearly half the way to the next village — Hirapur — singing Ramadhun as he had done on his arrival. There were only two Hindu families here. The prayer gathering was the biggest during the pilgrimage. Before Gandhiji left Hirapur, the Muslim women of the place expressed a desire to meet Manu. She took Gandhiji along with her. But with one exception none of the women would come out. Gandhiji thereupon visited them in their huts, greeting each one of them including the children.

\* \* \*

Leaving the scenes of devastation and desolation behind, the pilgrim next entered upon a landscape of enchanting beauty. After crossing an inland waterway, the footpath zig-zagged up a steep bank, bringing into view a big mango orchard, with a magnificent tank in the middle, about half a furlong long, abounding in ducks and wild geese that paddled unconcerned over its broad, rippling expanse. Presently they went up with a wild scream and cackle on finding the peace of their sanctuary violated by intruders. Beyond the far end of the mango orchard stretched a lovely vista of an undulating green meadow for miles.

Bansa was reached on Independence Day, the 26th January, 1947. Gandhiji was asked to hoist the national flag in commemoration



of the declaration of independence by the Congress 18 years ago. Even during his detention in the Aga Khan Palace at Poona, he had observed the day and hoisted the flag unfailingly and, after his release from detention when repression was at its height, he had insisted on its being observed in the teeth of the Government's prohibitory orders. But he felt no zest for observing it in Noakhali, where the hearts of Hindus and Muslims were rent asunder and brother had turned against brother. "I could fight it out against the British," he sadly remarked. "But whom am I to fight here? My own brothers? The Muslims may tolerate it and say nothing. But I know inwardly they will chafe. I do not want that. The tricolour was devised by me to symbolise all the religions, all the communities and all the people of India—Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians and Sikhs. They did all actually regard it as their flag once. Many laid down their lives for it. But today we have fallen upon evil times. Unless we wake up, independence, when it comes, will turn into an empty dream." And so the flag-hoisting ceremony was given up.

It was biting cold and his feet were again nearly frozen when Gandhiji reached Palla next day. As he contemplated the peace of nature around him, the anguish of what he had been witnessing day after day during his progress in the affected area once more overwhelmed him. "I am in love with the huts of Bengal," he exclaimed with a sigh. "They are so airy and light. Why cannot, in the midst of nature's plenty which is here scattered all around, Hindus and Muslims live together as brothers? Look at the stupidity of it. On one side there is the threat of famine and starvation; on the other they are retarding cultivation by the boycott of Hindu cultivators and thereby, in their ignorance, applying the axe to their own feet. . . . That is why I daily pray, 'May God grant right understanding to all men.'"

\* \* \*

The under-current of organised Muslim or rather Muslim League hostility came to a head during the next phase of Gandhiji's Odyssey. On the way to Panchgaon, at one place, as usual Manu went to visit Muslim women in their homes but they hurriedly shut their doors in her face. An old Muslim lady came after a little while and rebuked them for being scared of a little girl "for nothing, for nothing at all", and affectionately pressed upon their visitor a piece of bread with fish! In vain the poor girl tried to explain that she was a strict vegetarian and did not take fish. The old dame would not believe her. How could anyone in Bengal—Hindu or Muslim—do without fish! "A Hindu is after all a Hindu," she exclaimed. "How can we believe after this that Gandhiji has come here to establish Hindu-Muslim unity!" To reassure her, Manu broke a piece of bread and ate it. The old dame was mollified and the other women came out after some persuasion. But the incident served to reveal how deep suspicion of Hindus had penetrated even among the Muslim women folk. It gave Gandhiji a shock.



Some members of Gandhiji's entourage had contacted the Secretary of the District Muslim League. As this gentleman, in the course of his conversation, had expressed some very admirable sentiments about Hindu Muslim cooperation in Noakhali, they arranged a meeting between him and Gandhiji. He met Gandhiji at Panchgaon but to everybody's surprise, leaving all his fine talk behind, began by demanding first, that all leaders and volunteers from outside should quit the district, as their presence hindered the restoration of normal, peaceful conditions; secondly, that the responsibility for the restoration and maintenance of peace should be deemed to be entirely of the local Muslim and Hindu leaders and they should be "left alone" to settle it amongst themselves; and thirdly, that Gandhiji should discontinue his public prayer meetings as they were disliked by the Muslims. Finally, he told Gandhiji that his presence was no longer necessary in the district but, if he insisted upon continuing his activity in Noakhali, he should confine himself to one place and not move from village to village.

Gandhiji replied that if the presence of anyone was a bar to the restoration of normal, peaceful conditions such a person or persons should be dealt with by the Government under its powers. Of course, the responsibility for the restoration of peace ultimately rested, as it must, on the local leaders. But they would be ill-advised to disdain the help of others, where it was proffered. Again, while he certainly did not *want* Muslims, or for that matter Hindus, to attend his prayer meetings, if he were asked whether he would *like* them to attend such meetings, he would certainly say "Yes". If there were Muslims who disliked his prayer meetings, they were free to absent themselves. But that, he hoped, did not mean that non-Muslims might not offer public prayers in the manner they knew best. Finally, as to the question of his stay in Noakhali, said Gandhiji, whilst he was bound to give due weight to the opinion of the Secretary of the Muslim League, he must be allowed to judge for himself whether his presence was necessary in the district or whether he should move from place to place or not.

### 3

The fusillade was continued at Jayag.

The new Ramadhun which had been commenced at Paniala was subsequently expanded by the addition of two more verses so that it ran:

Thou art the purifier of the fallen,  
 Iswar and Allah are Thy names,  
 Do Thou grant right understanding to all men,  
 Krishna and Karim are Thy names,  
 So are Rama and Rahim,  
 Do Thou grant right understanding to all men.



This, too, was taken exception to by a section of the Muslims. Gandhiji was accused of coupling the names of Rama and Krishna with Rahim and Karim. It was blasphemous, it offended Muslim ears. Similarly, did he not consider it was wrong for him, a non-Muslim, to recite anything from the Koran?

The question came to Gandhiji as a painful surprise. It betrayed such intolerance and narrowness of mind. It was untrue that he was trying to corrupt Islam by coupling the Hindu incarnations of Rama and Krishna with the One God of Islam. He claimed to be a humble man of God. He had never invited, on principle, anybody to change his religion. His object was ever to make Muslims better Muslims, Hindus better Hindus, and Christians better Christians. His religion was not exclusive, he said, but expansive and all-inclusive. Rama, Allah and God were to him convertible terms. Millions of Hindus knew Him under the name Rama.

\* \* \*

Constant repetition of a word-symbol connoting the Ultimate Reality, or whatever aspect of it appeals to one, with concentration till it results in "such a silence of intellect, will and feeling, that the divine Word can be uttered within the soul"<sup>3</sup> forms part of the spiritual exercises prescribed in almost all religions, e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam alike. "If the word is simply repeated 'all whole, and not broken up or undone' by discursive analysis, the Fact for which the word stands will end by presenting itself to the soul in the form of an integral intuition."<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Gandhiji that word was Rama. As a child, he has recorded, he used to be afraid of ghosts. "There are no ghosts," his nurse Rambha used to tell him. "But if you are afraid, repeat Ramanama." Later in life he discovered that learning takes one through many stages, but it fails utterly in the hour of danger and temptation. "Then faith alone saves."<sup>5</sup> Ramanama thereafter became the staff of his life—the biggest thing in his spiritual firmament.

Every aspirant has experienced the futility and dangers of trying to combat by violent efforts of the surface will the leviathans that lie hidden in the deep of the sub-conscious in the course of attaining self-discipline. "The more man operates, the more he is and exists. And the more he is and exists, the less of God is and exists within him."<sup>6</sup> Too much preoccupation with evil thoughts can easily become an obsession. Striving must, therefore, be tempered by detachment. Hence the need for self-surrender or seeking His grace by bringing unto Him all the fruits of our striving, success as well as failure. The tremendous increase in the psychopathic phenomena—unhealthy neuroses and complexes that result from suppression are more and more engaging the attention of the psychiatrists. No more effective way of getting the better of them has been discovered so far than the one prescribed by the ancient



spiritual teachers, viz., by means of the "sharp sword of detachment" and self-surrender. "When thou feelest that thou mayest in no wise put them (distractions) down," wrote the great mystic, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, "cower then down under them as a caitiff and a coward . . . and think it is but folly to strive any longer with them, and therefore, thou yieldest thyself to God in the hands of thine enemies. . . . And surely, I think . . . it is nought else but a true knowing and a feeling of thyself as thou art. . . . And this meekness meriteth to have God mightily descending . . . and cherishingly dry thy . . . eyes, as the father doth to the child. . . ."7 Gandhiji has put on record his testimony that "Ramanama gives one detachment and ballast and never throws one off one's balance at critical moments."8

The recitation of Ramanama, however, has nothing in common with *jantar-mantar*—charms or magical formulas. Nor can it take the place of effort. "There is a school of philosophy which teaches complete inaction and futility of all effort. . . . In my humble opinion, effort is necessary . . . (but) it has to be irrespective of results. Ramanama or some equivalent is necessary, not for the sake of repetition, but for the sake of purification, as an aid to effort . . . for intensifying and guiding it in proper channel."9 And he has again recorded the testimony of his own experience that, "he who can make full use of it can show powerful results, with very little outside effort."10 If recited from the heart, Ramanama "charms away every evil thought; and evil thought gone, no corresponding action is possible."11 This does not mean that a man who has fortified himself by the recitation of Ramanama can take all liberties and still keep safe. "Such a man simply will not take any liberties with himself. His whole life will be an infallible testimony to the inward purity."12

\* \* \*

What is Ramanama?

Tulsidas, the prince of devotees, in his *Ramayana* makes character after character, beginning with the sage Yajñavalkya, pose this question. Finally in an immortal dialogue, Parvati asks Shiva: "Who is this Rama whose name sages and seers, including yourself, repeat ceaselessly to attain supreme bliss and release from the bondage of life and death? Is he the same Rama as the ruler of Ayodhya, who forlorn grieved over the loss of his spouse Sita like an ordinary mortal and killed Ravana in high rage or is he some other being?" And the reply is given: "The Rama, on whom gods, sages and seers from Brahma downwards meditate in their devotions is not the Rama of history, the son of king Dasharatha, the ruler of Ayodhya. He is the 'eternal', the unborn, the one without a second . . . timeless, formless, stainless."

That was Gandhiji's Rama, too. He belonged equally to all. "His names are as numerous as there are men."13 "The names do not indicate



individuality but attributes . . . though He is above all attributes, Indescribable, Immeasurable.”<sup>14</sup>

Gandhiji did not believe in incarnations in the orthodox sense. Inasmuch as God is omnipresent, He dwells within every human being, and all may, therefore, be said to be incarnations of Him. Rama and Krishna were called incarnations of God, because of the divine attributes with which human imagination had invested them. They were “in truth creations of man’s imagination”.<sup>15</sup>

But whether they actually lived or not did not affect the picture of them in men’s minds. “More potent than Rama is *nama*—the Name.”<sup>16</sup> Gandhiji had accepted all the names and forms attributed to God as symbols connoting one formless omnipresent Rama. To him Rama, described as the son of Dasharatha, therefore, was “the all-powerful essence whose name inscribed in the heart removes all suffering—mental, moral and physical.”<sup>17</sup> He likened it to “a mathematical formula which summed up in brief the result of endless research.”<sup>18</sup> “Ramanama is not like black magic.”<sup>19</sup> “Mere repetition of Ramanama possesses no mysterious virtue.”<sup>20</sup> It must be taken with all that it symbolises. In this respect it differs from “faith-cure”. It does not mean blind cure. It must “stir the soul”. To take God’s name one must live a godly life. God and His Law being one, an “individual with whom contemplation of God has become as natural as breathing is so filled with God’s spirit that knowledge or observance of the Law becomes second nature, as it were, with him. Such a one needs no other treatment.”<sup>21</sup> To such a one “discipline and self-control will come easy. . . . His life will run an even course.”<sup>22</sup> To suffer in order to relieve others’ suffering will become a part of his being and fill him with an ineffable and perennial joy. Thus a devotee of Rama might be said to be an embodiment of the ideal of *sthitaprajna*—man with steady or balanced intellect—described in the Gita. And since all illness is the result of our transgression of God’s laws, such a person, Gandhiji held, will not fall ill. If per chance he does fall ill, he will not go to the ends of the earth to be cured. “It is not for the dweller in the body to get the body cured anyhow. . . . He who realises that the soul is something apart from, though in the body; that it is imperishable in contrast to the perishable body,”<sup>23</sup> will be content to be his own healer, depending upon Ramanama and therapy of nature’s five elements to make him and keep him well. And if these fail to achieve the cure, he will not be perturbed but will welcome death as a friend and a deliverer.

And the result would be the same, said Gandhiji, if one were to go through the entire gamut of God’s names current in all climes, all countries and all languages. Thus, a Christian could find the same solace and comfort in repeating the name of Jesus and a Muslim from the name of Allah. They had all identical meaning and produced identical results under identical circumstances. To take exception to the repetition



of Rama and Rahim, Krishna and Karim was, therefore, the very limit of bigotry. Was there one God for the Muslims and another for the Hindus, Parsis or Christians? No, there was only one omnipotent and omnipresent God. "He is named variously. People remember Him by the name which is most familiar to them." He had his preference for Ramanama as he had been familiar with it since childhood, and it had been his constant support in life's struggles.

He had known several Muslim friends, he told the objectors, who were called simply Rahim and Karim by their parents and dear ones. Yet no one had suggested that it was an attempt to set up a rival to God. He hoped the objectors would appreciate the tolerance, friendliness and equal respect towards all faiths, which his practice of remembering God by the names of Rama and Rahim, Krishna and Karim connoted instead of seeing red in it. It was some consolation to him to find that all Muslims did not share those intolerant views. Some liberal Muslims addressed communications to him upholding his stand against his critics who had objected to his reciting anything from the Koran, or to a "non-believer" speaking about things pertaining to Islam. They cited chapter and verse from the Koran to show that Islam was a broad-based and exceptionally tolerant religion; it invited criticism and invited the world to study the Koran.

At Amki (30th January) came the real test of his faith.

Goat's milk was not to be had in the village. But Gandhiji made light of it and said that coconut milk was as good as goat's milk for him and coconut oil could easily take the place of goat's butter in his menu. Accordingly, instead of goat's milk he had 8 oz. of coconut milk. It brought on a violent attack of diarrhoea. By evening he was utterly exhausted. While he was returning from the commode Manu noticed that he perspired profusely. Usually symptoms like yawning, coldness of hands and feet and setting of the eyes generally heralded an attack of giddiness in his case. Noticing the frequency of yawning and profuse perspiration, she thought he was about to faint. She had hoped that he would manage to reach his room. But he was already collapsing. She wiped off the perspiration from his forehead and gently propped up his head, as he sank down, and called Prof. Nirmal Bose to help her. Together they lifted him and laid him in his bed. It then occurred to her that everybody would regard her as a fool if anything serious happened to Gandhiji as a result of her not sending for a doctor. She wrote a note asking Sushila to come and was about to hand it to the Professor when Gandhiji opened his eyes. "I did not like your calling Nirmal Babu," he said to her. "You are yet a child. I can, therefore, excuse you. But what I had really expected of you was that on an occasion like this, you would do nothing but take Ramanama with all your heart. I was, of course, doing it all the while. . . . Now, don't inform anybody about it, not even Sushila. Rama alone is my true doctor. He will



keep me alive so long as He wants to take work from me, otherwise He will take me away.”<sup>24</sup>

Manu gave a start and with a quick movement of the hand tried to tear up the slip, which she had written, before Gandhiji should notice it. But it was too late. “So, you have already written?” he asked. She pleaded guilty. Gandhiji proceeded: “Today God has saved both you and me. Sushila would have left her work in her village and rushed to me. It would have made me angry with myself and with you. I have today been put to the test. If Ramanama has really established dominion over my heart I shall not die of illness. And this law holds good not only in respect of me but in respect of everybody.”<sup>25</sup>

From his reading of scriptures and his personal observation, Gandhiji had come to the conclusion that when a man has attained a complete and living faith in the Unseen Power, the body undergoes internal transformation and becomes free from all ailments. But the test of it is that Ramanama should continue even with one’s last breath, and that not mechanically but with one’s whole being. As an illustration, he mentioned the classical instance of Hanuman, the monkey-god, whose body, the legend goes, as a result of his complete self-dedication to Rama had become unassailable like a rock. “We might not be able to make our bodies as strong as Hanuman’s but we can at least make our spirit as strong. At any rate, it is for us to make the attempt and leave the rest to God. That is what the Gita teaches us.”<sup>26</sup>

#### 4

A big crowd awaited Gandhiji at Amishapara. Among them was a woman bent double with age. She was said to be a hundred years old. Gandhiji seated her by his side with all the reverence due to old age and put round her neck a garland which he took off his own. It was the crowning satisfaction of the old dame’s centenarian career. With her face wreathed in smiles she hobbled out of the presence of her illustrious “son”, tapping the ground in front of her with her stick, and nodding her head approvingly, just as she had come!

An ex-airman, who had absconded and taken on an alias, had come to Gandhiji and become a member of his entourage. Gandhiji had accepted his services on the condition that he was to remain with him and work under his direct supervision. He had in that way taken many a revolutionary and absconder under his wing and weaned them from the cult of violence. Some of them later became his trusted co-workers. This friend, however, on reaching Amishapara broke away from his discipline and wanted to set up for himself independently. It was characteristic of Gandhiji that immediately he alerted the authorities. In a letter to the Superintendent of Police, he wrote: “R. has suddenly left me. I do not know whether you need or can do anything against



him. But it is well for you to know that such a man is at large in Noakhali. He belongs to Malabar. I am sorry for him. He can be a good worker if he is steady."

At the prayer gathering in the evening Gandhiji was able to share a piece of good news with his audience. Sushila had been suddenly called to Sevagram in connection with the management of Kasturba Hospital there, of which she was in charge, but her Muslim patients in Noakhali had come to value her services so highly that they would not let her go and wanted her to stay on at least till they were all cured! As a further result of her stay in the village, some of those who had taken part in the October disturbances had offered to restore to the owners the looted property. Referring to it, Gandhiji remarked that it was a happy omen and he for one would certainly ask the Government to drop the prosecutions if the looted property was returned. But the return must be sincere and full, not merely a token one to avoid prosecution. What he wanted was a real change of heart.

Although the immediate cause of the Noakhali disturbances was the religious fanaticism of the Muslim mass which had been exploited by the League for a political purpose for the propagation of Pakistan, the predisposing cause was economic. Bengal had come early under the Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornwallis, which left the landlord free to do what he liked with his tenants in return for a fixed rental which he had to pay to the British Government. It had left an ugly legacy of an oppressed and discontented tenantry and a landless proletariat on the one hand and an autocratic landholdism on the other which tended to become more and more parasitic. A movement had been going on in Noakhali for some time past for the reduction of the landlord's share to one-third of the produce and a bill to that effect was before the Bengal Legislative Assembly. It was an agrarian movement which cut across communal alignments. The bulk of the workers were drawn from the leftist elements from both the communities. But the landlords were mostly Hindus. The proposed legislation had caused perturbation among them. Gandhiji dealt with the question in a series of prayer discourses. He had always held, he said, that land really belonged to the Lord of all, i.e., society and, therefore, to the tiller. As an old popular adage had it, "All land belongs to the Lord" (*Sabhi Bhumi Gopalki*). But so long as that ideal was not realised, any movement for the reduction of the landlord's share was a step in the right direction. Only it should be non-violent. The reform should be brought about by the cultivation of a healthy public opinion. It would call for patience on the part of the reformers. As the means so the end—was a sound maxim. Many a movement had come to grief by reliance on doubtful means.

Some people feared that while Gandhiji wanted the transformation of society to be achieved by purely non-violent means, interested parties might slur over that portion of his advice and exploit his moral support



to their demand to carry on the movement in a violent way. Would it not, therefore, be wrong for him, they asked, to lend support to such a movement which would result in the entire middle class of Bengal being "utterly ruined"? And if that happened, would not the ruin ultimately affect the common villagers, too, by depriving them of the services which were being rendered to the village economy by the landlords?

Gandhiji answered that he was in no position to deliver a verdict on the actual merits or demerits of the local issues of which he had not made a sufficient study. He could only speak in terms of general principles. The landlord's land was not to be confiscated; only his share was to be reduced. Surely that could not spell his "utter ruin". It was wrong to allow themselves to be obsessed by the communal aspect of the question. "It might be that in Noakhali the landlords were mostly Hindus. But if the legislation itself is sound it should not matter whom it affected." They should examine every problem strictly on its merits. His advice to the land-owners, therefore, was that they should accept the principle underlying the demand for the reduction of the owner's share and work for solid amendments. "I see a time coming when all land will belong to the State, i.e., the tiller of the soil. For years past India has lived through confiscation. Why invite the risk of confiscation by resisting moderate reduction? For, much as I would like it, there is no guarantee that under independence, the State would be conducted on wholly non-violent lines." He concluded: "It goes without saying that the utter ruin, i.e., the liquidation of the land-owners brought through violence would ultimately involve the cultivators, too, in ruin. If the land-owners act wisely, neither party will lose in the end."

Arising out of this, he was later asked a series of questions on his theory of trusteeship. But an examination of Gandhiji's trusteeship doctrine must be reserved for another place. (See Vol. IV).

At Sadhurkhil, where Gandhiji arrived on the morning of 3rd February, ended another phase of Gandhiji's pilgrimage. There was a hysterical patient in one of the Muslim houses at Sadhurkhil. He seemed to be somewhat unhinged. He caught hold of Gandhiji's hand and told him that he (Gandhiji) was "under arrest" for what had happened in Bihar. Gandhiji had always a great way with lunatics. He good-humouredly engaged him in conversation without betraying the slightest perturbation and the lunatic was soothed. Once before also, being confronted by a dangerous lunatic, he had been able to extricate himself from a hair-raising situation by his tact, good-humour and unruffled presence of mind, when the slightest nervousness or even a suspicion of panic on his part would have spelt disaster.

In the house where Gandhiji was put up in this village, again, there was an insane patient. Could he do something for him? Gandhiji was asked. He wrote out on a slip of paper that if Ramanama was



repeated by the patient rhythmically, long enough and with faith, it would surely cure him of his insanity.

It was now one month since Gandhiji had set out on his bare-footed pilgrimage. His appreciation of the situation was that as a result of his presence the riot-affected community had, to a very large extent, mustered up courage and shed fear; that the leaven of goodwill was slowly but silently at work. It had fortified his faith in human nature to discover that the heart of the Muslim community, in spite of all that happened and was happening, was sound and not unresponsive to the silent message of selfless service and love. He reiterated his conviction that if he really had the innate purity which he claimed for himself, his labours would bear fruit and endure. His test of purity included, he said, perfect control over one's thoughts; it should show itself in the health of body and mind, capacity for work and the quality of work, and above all in "a mental equipoise which nothing can disturb".

A couple of days ago he had waked up earlier than usual owing to some mental worry. Referring to it he remarked: "I did not like it. It only shows how far I am from the ideal of unruffled equipoise described in the Gita. But I feel I am daily nearing it."



## CHAPTER IX

### THE CHALLENGE OF INDEPENDENCE

#### 1

THE MUSLIM LEAGUE had fondly hoped that after the 6th December, 1946, declaration of His Majesty's Government, the Congress would be compelled to let Assam and the North-West Frontier Province be absorbed willy-nilly in the Groups C and B respectively. Otherwise the constitution of Indian independence that the Constituent Assembly might frame would be declared by the British Government *ultra vires*. In the latter case, the Muslim League would accept the 16th May plan and then demand that, since the Congress had failed to accept the long term plan of the Cabinet Mission as explained by H.M.G. in their 6th December declaration, the Congress nominees were no longer entitled to remain in the Interim Government at the Centre, and the Muslim League should be left in sole charge. The League, perhaps, also hoped that if the Congress put itself out of court with the British Government, the British Government would concede the League's demand for another Constituent Assembly and a separate Centre for the six Provinces claimed by the League for Pakistan. The partition of India would then become a *fait accompli*. But the 6th January, 1947, resolution of the All-India Congress Committee following Gandhiji's lead from Srirampur, made short work of all these expectations. The operative part of that resolution ran:

The A.I.C.C. realises and appreciates the difficulties placed in the way of some Provinces notably Assam and the N.-W.F.P. and the Sikhs in the Punjab by the British Cabinet Scheme of 16th May, 1946, and more especially by the interpretation put upon it by the British Government in their statement of 6th December, 1946. The Congress cannot be a party to any such compulsion or imposition against the will of the people concerned, a principle which the British Government have themselves recognised. The A.I.C.C. (however) . . . with a view to removing the difficulties that have arisen owing to varying interpretations, agree to advise action in accordance with the interpretation of the British Government in regard to the procedure to be followed in the Sections. It must be clearly understood, however, that this must not involve any compulsion on a Province. . . . In the event of any attempt at compulsion, a Province or part of a Province has the right to take such action as may be deemed necessary in order to give effect to the wishes of the people concerned.



His Majesty's Government, in their statement of 6th December, had said that the decision in the Sections, including questions relating to framing of the constitution of Provinces included in each Group, should, in the absence of agreement to the contrary, be taken by a simple majority vote of the representatives in the Section. But Sir Stafford and Lord Pethick-Lawrence had also declared in the course of their statements in Parliaments that no Province could be forced into a Group against its will; that the right of a Province to opt out of a Group should not be tampered with, and any attempt to frame a Provincial constitution which prejudiced such right of a Province would be against the letter and spirit of the State Paper of 16th May, 1946.

The reservation in the A.I.C.C. resolution exempting Provinces from compulsion, the London *Times* pointed out, was "a plain invitation to Mr. Jinnah and his supporters to give Assam, the Frontier Province and the Sikhs the same kind of assurances as they were demanding for themselves."<sup>1</sup> Surely, H.M.G. could not force Assam or N.-W.F.P. to accept a constitution in the framing of which they had no part just as it could not contemplate forcing on the non-participating units a constitution which the Constituent Assembly might frame in the face of the Muslim League's boycott. It was, therefore, for the League to reassure the Provinces concerned that work in the Section in which it held a majority would be so conducted as not to infringe the letter and spirit of the Cabinet Mission's plan as explained by H.M.G.'s Ministers in the Parliament.

Proceedings in the Section, Maulana Azad pointed out in a Press interview, could be carried out in one of two alternative ways. Either Bengal, which had a majority in the Section C, could use its majority in order to frame the constitution for Assam "in a manner which would, in fact, though not in theory, destroy the right of the majority in the Province to opt out at a later stage, or it could refrain from any such interference in the Section with the constitution of Assam." In the latter case, Assam would be able to exercise its right of "opting out at the appropriate time", if a Group constitution was framed by the majority in the Section which Assam did not like. Everything would depend on how the representatives of Bengal acted in the Section. "If the first of the two methods mentioned above is to be followed, Assam's apprehension would be fully justified and nobody can blame them if her representatives walk out of the Section. If, however, Bengal's representatives adopt the second method, no problem will arise."<sup>2</sup> The same would hold good in regard to the N.-W.F.P. and Sind in Section B.

This showed, the Maulana concluded, that the Congress had "accepted in full the British Government's statement of 6th December and the League can have no excuse for remaining away from the Constituent Assembly." If in spite of it, remarked Gandhiji carrying the argument further, the League did not come into the Constituent Assembly, there



was nothing in the language of either 16th May plan of the Cabinet Mission or in H.M.G.'s declaration of 6th December to prevent Provinces belonging to Group A together with N.-W.F.P. and Assam from Groups B and C respectively meeting in the Constituent Assembly and framing a constitution of independence for the participating units and inviting others to take advantage of it if they wished. The logic of H.M.G.'s declaration made it obligatory on the British Government to recognise the constitution which the Constituent Assembly might frame in terms of the State Paper of 16th May, even though all the Provinces might not participate in the Constituent Assembly, so long as the constitution thus framed was not to be imposed upon the non-participating units. In no case could H.M.G. set up a separate Constituent Assembly or a separate Centre for the non-participating Muslim-majority Provinces, as that was specifically ruled out under their 16th May plan.

This was a stunner for the Muslim League. In its desperation, it proceeded to denounce the Constituent Assembly itself. The Working Committee of the League met at Karachi on 31st January, 1947, and adopted a resolution characterising the All-India Congress Committee's resolution as "no more than a dishonest trick and jugglery of words". It denounced the election to the Constituent Assembly as "illegal" and the Constituent Assembly itself as "a rump" in which "only the Congress Party is represented". It demanded that the British Government should declare that the "Congress . . . has not accepted the statement of 16th May" and the Constituent Assembly should, therefore, be forthwith dissolved. Even the Conservative London *Times* was forced to characterise the League resolution as "preposterous" and "a tactical error".<sup>3</sup>

If the elections and proceedings of the Constituent Assembly were illegal, Gandhiji pointed out in his post-prayer address on the 3rd February, their legality should be challenged in a court of law. Otherwise, the charge had no meaning. The proper thing for the League was to go into the Constituent Assembly, state its case and influence its proceedings by appeal to reason. But if it did not want to do that, the alternative was to test the sincerity of the Constituent Assembly and see how it dealt with the Muslim problem. The League owed that much to itself and the country, unless it wanted to rely upon the law of the sword. It was a travesty of facts to say, as the Karachi resolution of the League had said, that the Assembly represented only the Congress when as a matter of fact barring the League all sections had participated in it including the nationalist Muslims. The British Government were bound to act according to the State Paper even if a few Provinces chose to establish their independence in accordance with that Paper. He hoped the British would not fail in that and forfeit all credit for honest dealing with India.

As Gandhiji envisaged the situation, all the three parties were on their trial. The verdict of the British Power and the Muslim League, he said, could be left to be written by history. But the Congress could



make history for itself by taking up fairly and squarely the challenge of independence in terms of the "Quit India" resolution.

The very possibility of the State Paper of 16th May, 1946, being withdrawn filled some Congressmen with dismay. What would happen if as a result of the League's boycott the British Parliament refused to recognise the constitution framed by the Constituent Assembly? they asked. Again, what would happen to the seceders from Groups B and C respectively if the Muslim League decided to come into the Constituent Assembly? It cut Gandhiji to the quick. How could they think that the fate of India's four hundred million hung on the breath of the British Parliament? As for the seceders, they could, if they had the grit and the courage, give the lead to the whole of India by framing a constitution of independence for themselves and asking the British forces to quit. The prospect of going into the wilderness might dismay those who could not do without the British protection. But what terror could it have for those who had challenged the British Power to withdraw unconditionally leaving India to her fate?

A very simple proposition but baffling for its very simplicity. How could a single Province acting alone declare independence in defiance of the mighty British Government? Gandhiji was asked during his pilgrimage. In a series of utterances, he set about to educate the people to think in terms of immediate, unadulterated independence. No power on earth could resist the lovers of liberty, who were ready not to kill their opponents but be killed to the last. This was the view that he had enunciated as early as 1919 when Gujarat had, at his instance, adopted the non-cooperation resolution in anticipation of the Congress. But since then they had travelled far. As he read the 6th December declaration of H.M.G., it had finally confirmed the basic principle which was embodied in the State Paper of 16th May; they could not resist the declared wish of a single Province. If that was true of one Province, how much more so was it for the whole lot of Provinces which the Constituent Assembly undoubtedly represented? But he was indifferent as to what the British Government said so far as Indian independence was concerned. That rested with the people of India and no outside power. Finally, why should they feel worried if the State Paper were withdrawn? The Congress had been accustomed to a life in the wilderness. They had nothing to be perturbed about if Congressmen had not lost their grit. Their goal was liberty and liberty they would take, no matter at what sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

Naturally this held good only, said Gandhiji, if the people could adhere to non-violence to the end, as a steady, straightforward and sincere policy without any mental reservations. They were vastly mistaken if in their heart of hearts, they thought they could drive away the English by the sword while professing non-violence. They did not know the determination and courage of the English. The British Power would not



yield to the sword but it would have to to the courage of non-violence which disdained to deal death against death. If India was still without real independence, it was because the people had not developed sufficient non-violence. The State Paper of 16th May, 1946, but registered the non-violent strength that India had so far developed as assessed by the British. He, therefore, wanted the people bravely to face the future, whatever it was, feeling secure in the confidence born of non-violent strength. It did not matter if non-violence was accepted as a policy provided such acceptance was sincere and honest.<sup>5</sup>

In a series of questions and answers, he proceeded to show in detail how the formula he had suggested would work out in practice.

What should be the basis of franchise in the free Provinces of India?

“Adult franchise with joint electorate perhaps with reservation of seats as a temporary or additional safeguard.” He could not contemplate favouritism for anyone. If there was to be favouritism, he would single out physical lepers. “They are an answer to the crime of society. If moral lepers would ban themselves, the physical lepers would soon be extinct.” Side by side with adult franchise—or even before that—he would have universal education not necessarily literary, except perhaps as an aid, but education for life including education in the rights and duties of citizenship.<sup>6</sup>

Suppose the Provinces that declared independence were not contiguous units, but were scattered, would not the presence of the non-federating units create a difficulty for the rest in the matter of common action?

It was a difficult question. But the difficulty, said Gandhiji, would cease if the setting was non-violent, viz., if the object of concert was not to score an advantage over the other units but to serve all by blazing for them the trail of independence. “Thus, supposing populous Bengal with its gifted Tagores and Suhrawardys framed a constitution based on independence and Assam with its opium habit dreamed away life, Orissa with its skeletons had no wish to be free and Bihar was occupied with family slaughter, they would all three be effectively covered by Bengal.” The essential condition of success was that there should be perfect sincerity which would command the confidence and respect even of the non-federating units.<sup>7</sup>

“Do you expect the constitution of the free Provinces to be made so ‘attractive’ that others would voluntarily be drawn into it?”

“Attractiveness is inherent in everything that is inherently good and just.”<sup>8</sup>

“Supposing the whole of Group A forms a common constitution, do you think Provinces which are now under Groups B or C will be able to join Group A if they so desired?”

“It goes without saying that if Group A succeeds in framing a



constitution, which is eminently fair, generous and just, not only would it be open to Groups B and C to join it, they would irresistibly be drawn to it.”<sup>9</sup>

The significance of Gandhiji’s answers lay in the indication they gave of the plan of action which was forming in his mind and which he would have liked the Congress to follow if the Congress had stood by its resolution of 6th January, 1947, instead of abandoning it in favour of Lord Mountbatten’s plan. It held in it the possibility of averting the vivisection of India and in any case the calamity of division under the British aegis. Why he regarded it as the worst calamity that could befall India will be discussed in its place.

But everything depended on the way his Ahimsa worked in Noakhali. In other words, how far he could infuse the courage of non-violence in the demoralised riot-affected people there. And so when Sardar Patel wrote to him to return to Delhi, he replied: “I am in my right place here. I am satisfied and I feel that my presence here has given some satisfaction to the affected people also, and will give more if I can last till the end. But as for that, who can say?”<sup>10</sup>

## 2

With a day’s halt at Dharampur and another at Prasadpur Gandhiji reached Nandigram on the 8th February. Men, women and children from the villages all along the way had turned out to greet him. At several places old women of the village welcomed him with garlands.

“What hospitality can we offer you?” a Muslim whose house he visited asked him.

“The hospitality of giving me a place in your love and affection,” Gandhiji replied.

An hour and a half’s walk brought Gandhiji next day to Bijoy-nagar. Problems of the workers who were engaged in village work in Noakhali formed the subject of discussion here. It was put to him that some workers became power-loving after some time. What could their co-workers do to check them and preserve the democratic character of the organisation? Non-cooperation was of course the answer. But would it not impair the organisation itself and damage its work?

Gandhiji answered that the question betrayed an ignorance of the nature and true meaning of non-cooperation. The questioner had obviously experience of non-cooperation that was at best partially non-violent and at worse barefaced violence sailing under the name of non-violence. Love of power was deeply ingrained in man’s nature and died only on one’s death. The difficulty of keeping power-loving people in check arose from the fact that the reformers themselves shared the same human frailty. Those who complained of others being ambitious of holding power were no less ambitious themselves. Drawing of distinction



between half a dozen and six was bound to prove a thankless task. To non-cooperate with power-lovers, one had to non-cooperate with the love of power in oneself first. Non-violent non-cooperation could only purify and strengthen an organisation, whereas the use of any other method, involving coercion or force to purge out power-loving or undesirable elements, destroyed its democratic character. Perfect democracy could be realised only in the background of non-violence.

Workers who had accompanied Gandhiji to Noakhali had been told and rightly that their job was to train up local workers to enable the people to stand on their own legs and then clear out as quickly as possible. But if the workers tried to draft local help they got involved in local power politics, whether they wished it or not, since there was hardly a village that was free from local factions. If, on the other hand, they tried to carry on work with the help of outside workers only, there was danger of their work crumbling as soon as outside help was withdrawn. What should they do to encourage local initiative and local cooperation?

Gandhiji's reply was that whatever the consequences, they must make use of local help as much as possible. If they were free from the taint of power politics themselves, local factions would not affect them. As for the training of local workers, he was equally emphatic: "I have not known a single village which is devoid of an honest worker. I would go so far as to say that even a few years' experience of residence in a single village, trying to work through local workers, should not be regarded as a conclusive proof that work could not be done through and by local workers. I can categorically say to the principal worker: 'If you have any outside help, get rid of it. *Work singly, courageously, intelligently, with all the local help you can get and if in the end you do not succeed, blame yourself only and no one else and nothing else.*' "

Not so easy to answer was a question that was put to him at Alunia a few days later. Repatriated women very much depended upon the presence of women workers from outside to instil hope and courage amongst them. How long should this be encouraged? Should not all workers from outside be gradually withdrawn?

Gandhiji said that what was true of men was equally true of women workers. They were there to instil faith in God and courage in the riot-affected sisters, not to make them feel helpless without the workers. They must tell the women in the villages that they were there only for the time being and the women must learn therefore to rely upon themselves.

An interesting suggestion was made to Gandhiji at another place, viz., that young men from East Bengal, who went to Calcutta and other places in search of careers, should give a portion of their time to their villages. Gandhiji, while approving of the suggestion, added that they could make an arrangement among themselves by which one batch would come and serve in the villages for a stipulated period at the



end of which its members could go back to their jobs and another batch take their place. In this way they would all be able to help rebuild the shattered economy and community life in the villages of devastated Noakhali. Those who might not, for some reason, find it possible to offer personal service could make a contribution in cash instead.

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Starting from the heart of Noakhali, Gandhiji's itinerary had zig-zagged first southward and then eastward. It then shot northward in the direction of Tipperah district coming closest to its border at Dalta. From there, after describing a pentagon, it again plunged southward till it reached Amishapara and then ran due west. Finally, by two sweeping movements northwards and westwards respectively it ended at Haimchar inside the border of Tipperah district. As it approached the border of Tipperah, at either end the scenes of devastation became grimmer and organised Muslim hostility more intense. On the way to Hamchadi and East Keroa sabotage was in evidence and several bridges had to be repaired more than once. It was the same when Gandhiji proceeded to West Keroa on the 14th February.

At West Keroa a Muslim Maulana from Khulna came to discuss with Gandhiji the problem of communal harmony when he was having his lunch which he invited the visitor to share with him. But the latter refused, as it was food touched by a non-believer! There seemed no other reason. Gandhiji twitted him, saying he did not know that even the Muslim community was tainted by untouchability!

Three local Muslims came to Gandhiji to request him to pray that God might make both the communities live in peace and brotherhood. They found him reading Abdullah Suhrawardy's collection of the sayings of the Prophet. At the evening prayer Gandhiji read out two of those sayings to the gathering. The first was: "Be in this world like a traveller or like a passer-on, and reckon yourself as of the dead." In the other saying the question was asked as to who was the best man and who the worst. The Prophet's reply was that he considered that man to be the best who lived longest and did good acts and he the worst who did bad acts. Making those sayings the text of his discourse at the evening prayer gathering, Gandhiji observed that a man should be judged by what he did and not by what he professed as against the doctrine put forward by some Muslim divines that a person may continue to indulge in bad acts with impunity so long as he subscribes to a particular creed that is claimed to be right. That applied to Hindus, Muslims and all alike. For the Hindus, the moral was that their Hinduism with all its magnificent spiritual heritage, would avail them nothing if they continued to harbour the inhuman practice of untouchability. The British might go but freedom would not come without complete removal of the blot of untouchability.

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Hemprabha Devi, the wife of Satish Chandra Das Gupta, sought Gandhiji's advice about setting up an organisation for Khadi work in Noakhali. Gandhiji had laid the greatest emphasis on Khadi as a cementing force but he warned her that Khadi would become a disruptive factor if they tried to organise it through a big, centralised organisation. The Muslim League would see in it an attempt to undermine its power through infiltration. He, therefore, suggested that no centralised organisation should be set up. Workers from outside with necessary training might be brought in to do the initial work. But all subsequent activity should be carried on through local people, and with the help of local finance on a decentralised basis.

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Next only perhaps to Shahpur, Raipur had been the worst storm centre during the disturbances. The people of the village, including some local Muslims, were eager to present Gandhiji with an address. But Gandhiji was anxious not to give any needless provocation to the hostile section of the Muslims. He asked those who had come with the address to drop the public part of the ceremony saying, "Real affection needs no demonstration. You can show your love to me by bearing in your hearts love for all."

There was plenty of evidence that trouble was still brewing. A Muslim who had come from the Punjab to meet Gandhiji had been robbed of all his belongings on the way. Similarly, a few days ago, another Muslim from Gujarat, who had come to see him, had been threatened by some local Muslims for coming to him; but he had stood his ground. On the morning of Gandhiji's arrival at Raipur an attempt was made to stage a *hartal*. The attempt, however, failed and a large number of local Muslims came forward to take part in the reception. They told Gandhiji that many more Muslims were eager to come but had been intimidated by some powerful local Muslims. Outside the prayer meeting in the evening leaflets were distributed asking Muslims to keep away from it. Some printed leaflets of a threatening nature were found stuck on the walls, in the name of a party styling itself as the *Muslim Pituni Party* or the "Muslim bludgeoners' organisation" which, as its name implied, was a party advocating violence.

There were two Jumma mosques at Raipur. The Imam in charge of one of them, at Gandhiji's request, took him and his party round his mosque, but the other, when similarly requested, said he had not the time "to see the trustees and obtain their permission".

While returning from the evening prayer meeting, Gandhiji visited a temple which had been seized by the local Muslims during the disturbances and turned into "Pakistan Club". It still bore that tell-tale signboard four months after the event. The local Muslims, however, assured Gandhiji that they would take all necessary steps for its early restoration. Thus sweet and bitter continued to alternate throughout



the pilgrimage, each turn of "the sad vicissitude of things" leaving the pilgrim a little mellowed, a little riper.

## 3

Limning of Utopias was not in Gandhiji's line. His was a realistic mind. But his advice to a Province that might have the self-confidence, the strength, and the will to declare independence of the British Power and take its destiny in its own hands, made that discussion relevant. From Dharampur onwards, Gandhiji's prayer meetings were turned into an open forum where everybody was free to ask any question he liked and discuss the picture of independence that was to be realised in the free Provinces so as to serve as a model for the rest of India. What emerged was a picture of the India of his dreams—a picture of a casteless and classless society, in which there are no vertical divisions but only horizontal; no high, no low; all service has equal status and carries equal wages; those who have more use their advantage not for themselves but as a trust to serve others who have less; the motivating factor in the choice of vocations is not personal advancement but self-expression and self-realisation through the service of society.

Since all service here ranks the same and carries equal wages, hereditary skills are conserved and developed from generation to generation instead of being sacrificed to the lure of personal gain. The principle of community service replaces unrestricted, soulless competition. Everybody is a toiler with ample leisure, opportunity, and facilities for education and culture. It is a fascinating world of cottage crafts and intensive, small-scale farming cooperatives, a world in which there is no room for communalism or caste. Finally, it is the world of Swadeshi in which the economic frontiers are drawn closer but the bounds of individual freedom are enlarged to the maximum limit; everybody is responsible for his immediate environment and all are responsible for society. Rights and duties are regulated by the principle of inter-dependence and reciprocity; there is no conflict between the part and the whole; no danger of nationalism becoming narrow, selfish or aggressive or internationalism becoming an abstraction where the concrete is lost in a nebulous haze of vague generalities.

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"In free Provinces, would only those have voting right who have contributed by manual-labour to the service of the State?"

"My reply is an emphatic yes. All adults above a certain age, male or female, who would contribute some body-labour to the State, would be entitled to the vote. Thus, a simple labourer would become a voter without any difficulty, whereas a millionaire, a lawyer or a merchant would be hard put to it, unless he voluntarily converted



himself into a labourer and contributed some socially useful body-labour to the State.”<sup>11</sup>

“Would you insist even on a Rabindranath or a great saint like Raman Maharshi earning his bread by manual labour? Why should not a brain-worker be considered as being on a par with manual workers since both perform useful and necessary social work?”

“Intellectual work has certainly its importance and an undoubted place in the scheme of life. But I have insisted on bread-labour for all. No-one can claim to be exempt from that obligation. I hold with Tolstoy that manual work far from being inimical to intellectual activity improves its quality. I dare say that in ancient times Brahmins worked with their body as with their mind. But even if they did not, in the present age body-labour is a proved necessity.”<sup>12</sup>

“What should those Hindus, who hold more land than they could themselves till, do with the surplus land in the face of the Muslim boycott?”

“They can sell off their surplus land or allow it to lie fallow and turn themselves into voluntary labourers. The ideal thing, of course, is that nobody should possess more land than he can till.”<sup>13</sup>

“Under the present social order the State does not take the responsibility of the education of the young and maintenance of the aged and the infirm. What would happen to the land-owners in case of sickness and old age and to their children, when land and capital are taken away from them? Should not an adequate provision be made for the education of the young and the maintenance of the old and the infirm?”

“I have laid down a universal proposition for an ideal society. But in the case under question the change over is not a matter of choice but necessity since it has been stated that owing to the boycott the Hindu land-owners do not get the labour which is principally Muslim. The question of the education of the young and the maintenance of the old and the infirm should not arise in the society of my ideal. The young should be able to get their education at home and a person who works willingly and diligently would not find support lacking for his aged and infirm dependents; the society would see to it. I am, however, free to concede that it is the duty of the State to provide education to the young and support for the aged and the infirm. Besides, I have not suggested that the owners should give up their land free. They would be free to sell it on suitable terms or, if there is a racket, they can hold on to it and let it lie fallow. It would not hurt.”<sup>14</sup>

“Since charity is ruled out, what should people do who are engaged in sedentary occupations but have lost their all during the last disturbances? Should they migrate and try to find a place where they can resume occupation to which they had been accustomed or should they try to remodel their life in conformity with the ideal of bread-labour for everybody?”



"I can never advise people to leave their homes. I certainly do not consider money gained by parasitic occupations as rightful gain. Nor do I consider it too late for anyone to shed bad or evil habits at any time. If everybody lived by the sweat of his brow, the earth would become a paradise. The question of the waste of special talent would not arise. For, if everyone laboured physically for his bread, poets, doctors, lawyers, etc., would use their talents not for lucre but for the service of humanity. Their services would be all the richer for their selfless devotion to duty."<sup>15</sup>

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Towards the close of his itinerary Gandhiji took up the question: What should be the vocational organisation of society? Vocational organisation of society, held Gandhiji, may be vertical and competitive, or horizontal and cooperative. Under the former, remuneration is according to the importance attached to a particular calling and on the basis of the law of supply and demand; in the latter all occupations are placed on an equal footing, all are paid equal wages by society. Under it a person will choose an occupation, not because of the personal prospects it offers, but because he has a special skill or aptitude for it. And since skills and aptitudes generally follow the line of heredity more or less, the average person in the normal course would, if there were no inequalities of remuneration to lure him away from it, tend to follow the occupation he is born in. Profit-motive or wage-motive would give place to service-motive. Choice of vocation would be with a view to subserve the good of the community instead of personal advancement or the interest of one's family.

Would that mean that one would be debarred from changing his hereditary occupation, if he felt a special urge?

"No," said Gandhiji, "not so long as one does not depend on it for one's living." Such cases will naturally be few. Thus Buddha was a ruling prince, Socrates a sculptor, St. Paul a tent-maker. Yet Buddha became the Enlightened One, teacher of mankind; Socrates the prince of philosophers and St. Paul an apostle. But none of them regarded their calling as a means of livelihood. On the contrary, they relinquished the occupations they were born in to set an example of utmost renunciation. If society followed that principle, philosophers and artists would all labour with their hands for their living. All artists would be craftsmen and craftsmen artists, and life a thing of beauty and a joy for ever.

The division of society into four main *varnas* or divisions according to birth, thus, represents a notional division only. It does not lay down a rigid or unalterable law to be imposed by authority; it only takes note of a tendency arising out of the operation of a natural law, viz., the law of heredity and environment. The notional four divisions can be modified, added to or reduced to suit modern conditions. Today the system has fallen into desuetude and there is a promiscuity of *varnas*. Therefore,



said Gandhiji, society must start *de novo*, all converting themselves voluntarily into *atishudras*, the lowest of the low, as he had himself done, by taking to scavenging as a universal duty and adopting the law of equal wages and equal status for all kinds of labour, physical and intellectual. The disturbing factor of inequality of wages and social status in respect of different kinds of service being eliminated, the natural tendency embodying the law of heredity and environment would assert itself and the true occupational organisation of society based on service-motive and the urge of self-expression and self-realisation would slowly re-emerge. Whether the "caste system" was a degenerated form of *varna* system as it existed in a prehistoric era or whether *varna* organisation was a purified and idealised form of the "caste system", Gandhiji claimed that for India there was no easier or more practical or shorter way than this to realise the ideal of a non-competitive, classless, egalitarian society without going through the travail of a class-war. The two fundamental principles on which it is based are that "there are no high and low, and everyone is entitled to a living wage, the living wage being the same for all."<sup>16</sup> The alternative is unrestricted and predatory individualism on the one hand and a totalitarian regimentation of society in regard to the life-activities and even thinking of the people on the other, as is being witnessed today in some parts of the world.

Gandhiji had asked those who had lost their trade during the disturbances voluntarily to turn themselves into labourers. If his advice were generally followed, he was asked, what would happen to education, commerce and the like? If division of labour were abolished, would it not lead to social disorganisation and would not "civilisation" receive a set-back?

The question, replied Gandhiji, betrayed ignorance of what he meant. In the case under reference if a man had to give up his original vocation it was not as a matter of choice, he would have to take to physical labour as a matter of necessity to keep body and soul together. He had never said that division of labour should be abolished. Only he insisted on equality of wages; the lawyer, the doctor and the teacher were entitled to no more than the scavenger. Then only would division of labour uplift humanity. There was no other royal road to true civilisation.<sup>17</sup>

Yet another aspect of his ideal society was taken up by Gandhiji at East Keroa and Raipur. In India agriculture was reduced to an uneconomic proposition through extreme fragmentation of holdings. How could the evil be remedied under the existing system of land-ownership? Could cooperative organisation provide a solution? Or should the State make the necessary changes in the law for the consolidation of holdings into big economic units? And what if the State was not willing?

Gandhiji said that he had no doubt that not State action but cooperative farming was the answer. His notion of cooperative farming



was that land should be held and tilled and cultivated collectively by the owners who should also hold capital, tools, animals, seeds, etc., in common. This would insure a saving of labour, capital, tools, etc., and make available to them many of the advantages incidental to large-scale farming that are intrinsically worth having. Cooperative farming of his conception would banish poverty and idleness from their midst. But all that would be possible only if people became friends of one another and as one family. When that happy event took place, communal trouble would be a thing of the past.<sup>18</sup>

As to the second question, the land belonged to the State. Therefore it was the duty of the State to see that it was worked in a manner that yielded the largest return, measured not in bushels of grain but in terms of the means of life for the people who worked upon it. He, however, warned that cooperation must not be brought about by force or compulsion, it was not to be imposed from above, it should be based on strict non-violence and grow from below. There was no such thing as success of violent or imposed cooperation. Hitler was an outstanding example of the latter. Everyone knew where it landed Germany in the result. It would be a sad thing if India also tried to build up the new society based on cooperation by means of violence or coercion. Good brought about through force contradicted itself, and destroyed individuality. Only when the change was effected through the persuasive power of non-violent non-cooperation, i.e., love, could the foundation of individuality be preserved and real abiding progress assured for the world.

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A deputation of Manipuris (Assam) complained to Gandhiji that though they were counted as "caste Hindus" their interests were not looked after by the upper castes. It gave Gandhiji an opportunity to elaborate his views on the future of caste in Hindu society. He had repeatedly said, he remarked in one of his prayer addresses, that if Hinduism was to survive it had to become casteless. He did not believe in any vertical divisions. If caste Hindus meant Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas only, the Hindus would find themselves in a hopeless minority. They would then have very little survival value. He hoped that when the British had withdrawn and independence was established truly, "superior caste" would be wholly extinct, all inequalities would be a thing of the past and the so-called backward classes would come into their own.<sup>19</sup>

A deputation of the Scheduled Castes came to Gandhiji and asked his advice as to whether they should aim at "elevating" themselves to the status of the so-called high castes by securing special concessions for themselves as a class or whether their effort should be directed to the eradication of untouchability root-and-branch so that all distinction between caste and out-caste would become a thing of the past?



Gandhiji answered that he naturally preferred the second course; classless and casteless society was his ideal. When untouchability was really gone, there would be no caste. All would be Hindus pure and simple. On the other hand, if Harijans set about organising themselves separately to secure exclusive privileges for themselves, it would precipitate a class conflict. Apart from the evils inherent in such a conflict, it would be an unequal fight in which, as far as he could see, the odds would weigh heavily against them. Besides, such a course would perpetuate the "bar-sinister" by creating a vested interest in "untouchability" which it was their object to eradicate. His advice to the Harijans, therefore, was that they should abolish all caste distinctions among themselves and observe the laws of cleanliness better than the so-called caste Hindus. Instead of working for separate treatment for themselves, they should "endeavour to merge themselves in the ocean of Hindu humanity. That is the only possible way to free India."

To the castemen, on the other hand, his advice was that they should prove that they had really obliterated caste by their readiness to take up all those occupations which the "untouchables" engaged in. Thus, they should be ready to do a scavenger's work. But it must be done in an intelligent, clean and sanitary manner; not in a mechanical, slothful and sluggish manner. The system of cleaning closets would then automatically be transformed. In England real Bhangis were famous engineers and sanitarians. He had seen European households where the Bhangis had a perfectly clean way of dealing with the human excreta. They were provided with cane baskets in which the pails were carried. One could easily mistake them for "dinner-baskets"! Needless to say, the Harijans would then live in the same streets as others without any segregation and enjoy the same municipal and civil amenities as the rest.

The problem of removal of untouchability in Gandhiji's hands thus assumed the form of double education. "Touchables" had to be taught "patiently by practice and example that untouchability is a sin against humanity and to be atoned for, and the untouchables that they should cease to fear the touchables and not show untouchability amongst themselves." The untouchables had further to get rid of the evil customs and practices rampant in their midst, e.g., drink, eating of carrion, unclean and insanitary habits, so that no-one might be able to point the finger of scorn at them. To realise the goal of this two-fold education, he had set up an all-India organisation, the Harijan Sevak Sangh, conceived essentially as a "society of penitents" to enable Hindu society to atone for its sin against the so-called untouchables. Its function being to discharge a debt rather than confer a privilege, its executive was manned exclusively by those who had to do the atonement.

"How can caste Hindus look after the interests of the Harijans? How can they realise the feelings of the classes who have suffered so long at their hands?" Gandhiji was finally asked.



“By caste Hindus voluntarily becoming scavengers not only in name but in action,” replied Gandhiji. “If the caste Hindus discharged their duty fully and properly, Harijans would rise at a bound and Hinduism, purified of its taint, would leave a rich legacy to the world.”<sup>20</sup>

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It was put to Gandhiji that Government were introducing schemes of industrialising the country for the maximum utilisation of the country's natural resources and raw materials instead of its abundant man-power which was being allowed to run to waste. Could this be called national development in the true sense?

It was obvious, Gandhiji replied, that any plan which exploited raw materials of the country and neglected the potentially more powerful man-power would never bring about human equality or make the nation really happy and prosperous. In the West they had neglected the universal man-power and concentrated power in the hands of the few who rose to power and fortune at the expense of the many. The result was that their industrialisation had become a doubtful boon to the poor in those countries and a menace to the rest of the world. If India was to escape such a disaster, she had to adopt and assimilate what was best in western countries and leave aside their attractive looking but destructive economic policies. So far as India was concerned, real planning should consist in the best utilisation of the whole of her man-power and distribution of her raw products to her numerous villages for being manufactured into goods instead of being sent out of the villages or exported from the country to be repurchased as finished articles at a high premium.<sup>21</sup>

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Gandhiji put last touches to his picture of the ideal society by explaining the true meaning and implications of Swadeshi—perhaps the least studied and most misunderstood of all aspects of his philosophy.

Gandhiji defined Swadeshi as “that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote.”<sup>22</sup> In other words it means a recognition of the special duty and obligation that one owes towards one's immediate environment. Thus “a votary of Swadeshi will carefully study his environment, and try to help his neighbours” as his first charge. He would not allow himself to be “lured by the distant scene and run to the ends of the earth for service”, throwing his own little world of neighbours and dependents out of gear, and more probably than not disturbing the atmosphere in the new place by his “gratuitous knight-errantry”.<sup>23</sup>

Swadeshi does not build a Chinese wall round itself. It only recognises the fact that “all living beings are members one of another . . . a person's every act has a beneficial or harmful influence on the whole world. . . . The influence of a single act . . . may be negligible. But that influence is there all the same, and an awareness of this truth should



make us realise our responsibility.”<sup>24</sup> Only he who has performed his duty to his neighbour, said Gandhiji, has the right to say “all are akin to me”. A person who pretends to serve the whole world while neglecting his neighbour really serves neither the world nor his neighbour but only his own pleasure or whim. This means that everyone must serve according to one’s capacity. In the case of one person his capacity may be exhausted in discharging his duty towards his neighbour, the capacity of the other man may require him to regard the whole world as his neighbour. This will not be a breach of the Swadeshi principle.

The principle of Swadeshi is capable of application to every walk of life. Thus, in religion it requires one to stick to the religion one is born in and help it grow into perfection by incorporating into it the excellences of all religions. This would make for constant growth and expansion of one’s own religion and toleration of religions other than one’s own. In economics, it would mean that one should make use of the services of a workman who is one’s neighbour and help him to acquire skill if he is unskilled rather than import a more competent workman at a cheaper rate from outside and leave this poor fellow to starve. Swadeshi thus constitutes the basis and foundation of the Sarvodaya ideal, the ideal of “universal good” or the “upliftment of all”—even “unto this last”. Similarly, Swadeshi precludes the use of cheap mass produced imported goods, e.g., foreign cloth, and letting millions of one’s own countrymen engaged in various indigenous crafts be ruined. Politically, Swadeshi stands for the decentralisation of power, i.e., regional freedom and autonomy so that every regional unit may rise to the full height of its stature by developing institutions suited to its peculiar tradition and genius.

This is not a cult of exclusiveness or narrow parochialism. As one thinker has put it, each individual or unit has to strike the “universal concrete in terms of the milieu of its own cultural heritage. Only by proceeding from wherever we are—geographically, spiritually or emotionally—can we make the integral effort needed for the progress and peace of the whole of humanity.” The reformer who bases his internationalism on Swadeshi thus “belongs to the whole human family but uses the language of associations to which he had been born, and which he transforms by inner transcendence.”

“Could a man discriminate in favour of his immediate neighbours to the exclusion of others and yet identify himself with the whole of humanity?”

Gandhiji answered that one could serve the whole of humanity through service of one’s neighbours, the condition being that the service of the neighbours was in no way selfish and did not involve the exploitation of any other human being. The neighbours would then understand the spirit in which service was rendered and they would give their services to their neighbours in turn. “If individual sacrifice is a living



sacrifice, it will grow snowballwise, gathering strength and momentum in geometrical progression till it encircles the whole earth.”<sup>25</sup>

“In free India whose interest shall be supreme? If a neighbouring State is in want, would India adopt an attitude of isolationism, saying that her own needs must come first?”

“A truly independent and free India would rush to the help of her neighbours in distress. A man whose spirit of sacrifice does not go beyond his own community, himself becomes, and makes his community, selfish. The logical sequel of self-sacrifice is that the individual sacrifices himself for the community, the community for the district, the district for the Province, the Province for the nation, and the nation for the world. A drop torn from the ocean perishes without doing any good. As a part of the ocean, it shares the glory of carrying on its bosom whole fleets of mighty ships.”<sup>26</sup>

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The picture of Gandhiji's ideal society is thus more or less a modern version of the *varnashram* system which was propounded in ancient India and which in its essentials is today being reincarnated in the materialistic garb of a “casteless, classless and Stateless society” based on socialised occupations with the slogan “To each according to his need, from each according to his capacity” and “All for each and each for all”. There is, however, one fundamental difference between the two, which precludes their being described in common terms. In the philosophy of *varnashram*, individual activity is not a means of realising an earthly paradise of material satisfactions either for ourselves or for others but a means of transcending our strangulated, ego-centred consciousness by selfless service of others, and realising our true nature from which we have become alienated. In other words, it regards the goal of life's activity to be the realisation of our essential oneness with the entire creation, and beyond that with the transcendental, universal spirit—the Supreme Reality—which informs all creation and in which the whole creation lives, moves and has its being. The Marxist classless society makes of the physical body and its needs exclusively its god and is driven by the logical implications of its philosophy to the use of violence and abandonment of scruples for the achievement of its goal. The conflict between means and ends which is thus set up renders it self-contradictory as a philosophy, and self-defeating as a technique of action. Gandhiji's philosophy, on the other hand, in its ultimate sense, makes the individual “in his striving to identify himself with the entire creation”, seek to be “emancipated from the bondage of the physical body” and rules out all means save truth and non-violence for the realisation of the goal of individual freedom, equality and brotherhood; in other words, the Kingdom of Heaven upon Earth.

Gandhiji gave to his ideal society the name *Rama-rajya*. “Let no one commit the mistake of thinking,” he explained addressing a big



gathering at Haimchar, that "*Rama-rajya* means a rule of the Hindus. My Rama is another name for Khuda or God. I want *Khudai Raj*, which is the same thing as the Kingdom of God on Earth." The rule of the first four Caliphs was "somewhat comparable" to it. "The establishment of such a Rajya would not only mean welfare of the whole of the Indian people but of the whole world."<sup>27</sup>



## CHAPTER X

### DEEPENING PENANCE

#### 1

A GRAND reception awaited Gandhiji at Devipur, the last village to be visited by him in Noakhali district. An equally unforgettable experience was in store for the workers. The route led through the compound of what was once the palatial residence of a rich Hindu landlord but was now a total wreck, a grim reminder of recent happenings. Emerging from it, the path zig-zagged along the lazily meandering Dakatia river. The woods on either side were in full bloom and resonant with the notes of chirping birds, the fresh morning air was heavily laden with the wild wood scent. Buried deep in the dark green foliage was Gandhiji's hut, looking the picture of beauty and peace. But it brought him no peace.

The village and its approaches had been decorated with flags, buntings, streamers and garlands of yarn intertwined with silver thread. It jarred on Gandhiji. As soon as his weekly silence was over, he sent for the principal worker. Where did they find all that? he asked. Surely it could not be from the village! The poor worker tried to explain. Their village had the good fortune to be hallowed by the Mahatma's sacred presence; so they raised a subscription to accord him a fitting welcome. That put the fat into the fire: "Did you realise that by indulging in this vain display you would acerbate communal passions? This display means nothing to me . . . but it will leave a legacy of ill will behind which will continue to poison the communal relations in this village for a long time to come. You are a Congressman. Did not it occur to you, knowing my strong views on Khadi, that ribbons and buntings made of mill cloth would only hurt me?"

In a reflective vein he proceeded: "The day's experience has set me thinking furiously. Would my colleagues, too, if they ever became Ministers, betray the same weakness for garlands and the like? I claim no extraordinary virtue for my workers. But this much I do expect of them that even as Ministers they would never forget the ideals that the Congress has professed and fought for all these years. What I have seen to-day, however, makes me wonder whether I am not living in a fool's paradise. It seems, God has waked me up with a rude shock to enable me to see where I stand."

The poor worker was dumb-founded at this outflow of lava.



Gandhiji was not satisfied till he had all the yarn in the wreaths and garlands unravelled and rewound to make it weavable. It made twenty cones. "While he was pouring out his soul like this," recorded Manu afterwards, "he looked the very picture of a volcano in eruption. But there was no trace of anger or reproach in his voice. From his face one might as well have thought that it was some terrible lapse of his own that he was confessing. And, indeed, he has often told us that a lapse on the part of his men should be regarded as his failure — failure of his teachings."

There was a Pir Saheb at Devipur, who enjoyed considerable reputation for sanctity in the locality. In the course of his talk with Gandhiji, he defended the forcible conversions during the Noakhali disturbances. It was only a dodge, he said, to save the lives of the Hindus and, therefore, commendable! Gandhiji asked him what was the good of saving one's life by bartering one's religion? It would have been better if the Pir Saheb had taught the Hindus to give up their lives but keep their religion. But the Pir Saheb maintained that there was nothing wrong in saving one's life by falsehood. Gandhiji felt deeply hurt by it and told the Pir Saheb that he would ask God, if he ever had the chance, why He had made such a man a Pir — religious head!

It was Gandhiji's firm view that conversions to be real and valid must be wholly voluntary and based on a proper understanding of the two faiths — one's own and the one presented for acceptance. He did not believe in conversion as an institution. He never asked non-Hindus, who were attracted to him, to accept Hinduism because he was a Hindu. Instead, he advised them always to make a proper study of Hinduism and incorporate in their own religions what they considered to be good in Hinduism. That was the way to avoid clash and expand one's own conception of religion. He told the Muslim friends, who came to dispute the issue of mass proselytisation with him during his pilgrimage in Noakhali, that he regarded Islam as a much superior faith to what it had been made to appear by some of them.

Crossing the border at Chardukhia, Gandhiji entered Tipperah district on the morning of 18th February, reaching Alunia at 8.30 a.m. The change of district was marked by a change in the scenery and the character of the soil. It was soft alluvium in Noakhali, loam in Tipperah. The areca gardens were there but coconut groves grew scarcer as one penetrated into the interior and one missed the stretches of rice fields that filled the interval between one village and another in Noakhali.

A friend from Bihar saw Gandhiji at Alunia. He had come all the way to sing *Tulsi Ramayana* to him, knowing how fond Gandhiji was of that immortal epic of devotion. But to detain the minstrel just for the sake of hearing him sing would have been unwarranted self-indulgence. Gandhiji told him that Bihar at the time needed every worker who was worth anything. And so back to Bihar the minstrel went.



The eagerness to simplify things for those who cooked his meals during the journey led Gandhiji sometimes to concoct strange dishes. Here is one: "As part of his midday meal, he had a thick, sticky stew of lady's fingers, bitter gourd and greens, without spices or salt. Into this he poured boiled goat's milk and took it after stirring it with a spoon. As I watched him do so I wondered how on earth anybody could swallow that horrible stuff! I had to pay dearly for it. Guessing perhaps what was passing in my mind he twitted me, 'What do you know of these things! When you feel really hungry whatever is set before you is a treat!' Out of his overflowing affection, he offered me two spoonfuls of the decoction which I swallowed with as brave a face as I could!"<sup>1</sup>

He was feeling none too well. He looked tired and complained of a "burning sensation in the eyes". To soothe it, he applied cold mud-poultices on the eyelids but would not hear of interrupting his journey. One of the letters he wrote from Devipur read: "The pressure of correspondence is growing daily and even more than that the pressure on the mind. My work, instead of becoming easier, is daily becoming more difficult. The opposition is stiffening. But in spite of it, my faith and self-confidence are steadily growing. What do odds matter when one is out to do or die? . . . When the third phase of my journey will begin, I do not know. I reach Haimchar on the 24th February. . . . For the time being, I shall thank Providence to enable me to complete the programme up to the 24th." Being pressed to take rest, however, he only remarked: "It will soon be over; it will not be many days before we reach Haimchar now."

Workers too who had come with Gandhiji four months ago had begun to feel the effect of the strain. They were unused to the diet and conditions of life in East Bengal and had to go through a great deal of mental and physical travail. Some of them felt fagged out. With lessening of the peril "leaders" representing all shades of thought and opinion also had begun to pour in in increasing numbers and the rank and file of workers belonging to various organisations found themselves distracted by the multiplicity of conflicting counsels. They sought Gandhiji's advice. He told them that those who felt the need could withdraw from Noakhali for rest and change. As for others, they should choose as their leader one who appealed to their heart as well as their head and then follow him implicitly. If there was a conflict between the head and the heart, they should boldly follow the latter. They should put him (Gandhiji) out of the picture. He was there to bring people together, not to divide them or to set one against the other.

He was very much exercised in body and mind. After the evening prayer on the 18th February, he went out in a boat to meet a very old man who dwelt on the other side of the river Dakatia. He was a poor Muslim. He had expressed a desire to meet Gandhiji but was too old to come himself. Gandhiji gladly acceded to his wish. The river



flowed leisurely through a lovely green landscape. The sun shone clear in the cloudless blue sky. The air was delightfully fresh; neither too cold nor uncomfortably warm. The boat glided silently over the river. On both sides, as far as the eye could reach, the banks were covered by thick crowds as varied and numberless as the green denizens of the woods around. But in the mid-stream there reigned infinite peace and the shouting and tumult on the banks seemed a thing far away. He was feeling weary and tired. "For a few moments, he lay with his eyes shut, as if in a trance, drinking in the breathless tranquillity of the scene around him. Then, beholding the multitudes, as the boat neared the other bank, he slowly muttered as if to himself: 'It reminds me of old days'."<sup>2</sup> He was thinking of the time when nearly a quarter of a century ago, almost a stranger on the Indian scene, he had risked his entire political career by making the crusade against untouchability an integral part of his political programme. "The situation then was somewhat similar to this though in many respects different. Then, as now, society and even some of my closest companions did not approve of my action. They had even packed up and made ready to go. But it gave me inner satisfaction. I remained adamant, and in the end they stayed. Time and again, in my life, contrary to all wise counsels I have allowed myself to be guided by the inner voice — often with spectacular success. But success and failure are of no account. As I have often said, they are God's concern, not mine."<sup>3</sup>

The reference was to a storm that his views and practice in respect of Brahmacharya had provoked. It had become a bone of contention between him and some of his co-workers; and a matter of deep heart-churning for himself. In that illuminating instant, through a lifting of the "fog of Time" he saw past and present as an unbroken continuity and knew that his fight over the issue of Brahmacharya, like his earlier fight against untouchability, was but a milestone in his quest of Truth or the working of the Law of Love which he had come out to realise for himself in Noakhali.

An incident happened next day which vividly dramatised the issue.

## 2

Mahashivaratri, celebrated in the Hindu calendar as a day sacred to Lord Shiva, overtook Gandhiji on the 19th February at Birampur. It is a day on which, according to an ancient Hindu legend, a hunter in a forest forced to pass the night up among the branches of a *Bel* tree, overlooking a shrine of Lord Shiva, attained enlightenment and freedom from the bondage of sin through His grace by an unconscious act of faith performed as he sighed and shivered in the winter's cold, causing *Bel* leaves, dear to the Lord, to drop as an unintended offering on the shrine below, while his involuntary sighs formed themselves into the all-saving syllable of Lord Shiva's name! The night on Mahashivaratri is long and



the kick of departing winter at its peak. By the same token it spells the end of winter and the promise of the return of spring. Devotees observe it by keeping a vigil and seeking Lord Shiva's grace by prayer and penance. It was the third anniversary of the death of Kasturba, Gandhiji's wife, who breathed her last as a prisoner during their detention at Poona in February, 1944. Gandhiji observed the day by fasting.

To all outward appearances it was just like any other day, it made no difference in Gandhiji's routine which began as usual at 4 a.m. and continued without a break for the rest of the day. The only allusion to the event which meant so much to him personally is contained in a solitary sentence in his diary: "On this day, and exactly at this time (7.35 p.m.) Ba quitted her mortal frame three years ago." Someone had sent him a present of oranges from Sylhet. He had them all distributed to children in commemoration of the day, saying, "Ba delighted more in feeding others than in eating".

At 7.35 p.m. the party assembled together for a recitation of the whole of the Gita. In front was placed a portrait of Kasturba, decorated with flowers and garlands. Gandhiji sat through the reading of the first six chapters, plunged in deep meditation. He then lay down to rest, being fatigued. The rigorous penance he had been putting himself through seems to have uncannily heightened his psychic sensitivity and he had the experience of a mystic union with the dear departed one for the first time. Describing it in one of his letters, he wrote: "During the Gita recitation, the whole scene of Ba's last moments three years ago came back and stood before my mind's eyes in all its vividness. I felt as if her head was actually resting on my lap. This was particularly so after the sixth chapter, when I laid myself down to rest and for a moment fell into a gentle sleep." "I must own," he wistfully remarked, "without her, I could not have succeeded in my striving for Ahimsa and self-discipline. She understood me better than anyone else. . . . Her loyalty was matchless. On the last day, I did not know, till the very end, in whose lap she would close her eyes. But she sent for me just before the end and breathed her last in my lap. That was Ba. We can fittingly observe her *shraddha* by recalling her virtues and trying to cultivate them in ourselves. I have not known another instance of such guileless faith, selfless devotion and service as hers. Ever since our marriage, she stood by me in all my life's struggles, with an unwavering fidelity and dedicated herself to my life's mission — body, soul and all — in a manner that has few parallels."

\* \* \*

Birampur was a fishermen's village. The river Meghna, which at one time used to skirt it had since shifted its course to a place six miles away. But the fishermen families remained. During the disturbances their fishing nets were forcibly taken from them or destroyed. To make fresh ones needed a plentiful supply of yarn which was not to be had. A prosperous community was thus reduced to destitution.



It was in a fisherman's hut that Gandhiji was accommodated at Birampur. The *amavasya* night is moonless, pitchdark and bitterly cold. A high wind was howling among the surrounding woods. The hut, in which Gandhiji slept, was rickety and could hardly keep the chill blast out. At midnight he woke up. His feet were freezing, and the whole body shook with cold. There was a hot water bottle in the kit. But there was no means of lighting a fire at hand. There was none else in the hut besides Manu to assist. She piled on him all the available warm clothing. But it failed to restore warmth. As a final resource, she began vigorously to press his legs, feet and back. That restored circulation somewhat and he fell into a gentle doze. "I, too, dozed off, I do not know when, and so we slept cozily in each other's warmth till prayer time."

Here was a typical situation. Was the juxtaposition, in the circumstances, wrong? Some of Gandhiji's friends held that it was wrong in terms of the ideal of Brahmacharya. In the same way some had objected to his using young girls as his "walking sticks" during his morning and evening walks, when he rested his hands on their shoulders. Gandhiji, on the contrary, held that to shirk such juxtaposition in a case of clear necessity or when duty demanded it was unnatural and incompatible with the ideal of Brahmacharya, as he had understood and practised it throughout his life.

Where did he stand in his penance for truth and Ahimsa? He had again and again asked himself that question in Noakhali. The reply depended upon where he stood in regard to his Brahmacharya. All his energies were bent on finding a correct reply to that question. (see next Chapter.)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji had hitherto strongly opposed the wholesale evacuation of the Hindus of Noakhali on the assumption that the harassment was the work of a comparatively few individuals; the bulk of the Muslim community did not want the minority to go out. But if the majority community became irrevocably hostile and would not tolerate the presence of the minority community in their midst, as a man of non-violence, he said, he would support the evacuation of the Hindus from the affected areas if the League Government or the majority community agreed to give adequate compensation. He could not possibly wish that the authorities should force the Hindus upon the Muslims if the latter did not want them, or try to force the majority community into submission. Nor could the minority community be protected that way. If, therefore, the majority community in Noakhali became so hostile towards the Hindus that it would not tolerate even the singing of Ramadhun and felt irritated when told that Rama was not a person but a synonym of God or Allah, and if unfortunately the boycott became the policy of the Government, he would have no alternative in terms of non-violence but to advise their evacuation.<sup>4</sup>



"You have advised evacuation of the Hindus from a non-violent stand-point if the majority community should become irrevocably hostile. But you have also maintained that a truly non-violent man should never give up hope of converting his opponent by love. In these circumstances, how can a non-violent man accept defeat and think of evacuating?" he was asked.

It was perfectly correct, replied Gandhiji, that a non-violent man would not move out of his place. For such a one, there would be no question of compensation. He would simply die at his post and prove that his presence was no danger to the State or the majority community. But he knew that the Hindus of Noakhali made no such pretension. They were simple folk, who loved the world and wanted to live in peace and safety. Such persons would consult their honour if the Government offered them compensation in order to see the majority living in peace. If the mere presence of Hindus irritated the Muslims of Noakhali, who were in a majority, he would consider it to be the duty of the Government to offer compensation, as it would be of the Government in a Hindu-majority Province to offer compensation to the Muslims if their presence "irritated the majority community".<sup>5</sup>

"In case of evacuation, under advice from the Government, should the evacuees ask for full compensation for all their movable and immovable property, and loss of business? In other words, what would you consider to be adequate compensation?"

The Government, replied Gandhiji, should compensate for both immovable and movable property when the latter could not be or was not removed with them by the evacuees. Loss of business was a ticklish question. He could not conceive the possibility of any Government shouldering the burden of such compensation. He could understand asking for a reasonable sum for enabling the persons concerned to start business in a new place.<sup>6</sup>

Gandhiji went on to add that whilst in theory he could admit the *possibility* of evacuation, his experience of all India had confirmed his belief that Hindus and Muslims knew how to live at peace with one another. He implicitly believed in Poet Iqbal's lines that the Hindus and Muslims who had lived together long under the shadow of the mighty Himalayas and had together drunk the waters of the Ganges and the Jumna had a unique message for the world.

"If the people may have to evacuate later with or without compensation, would it not be better that they should 'take time by the forelock' and go forth in an organised manner?" he was finally asked.

If by taking "time by the forelock", replied Gandhiji, was meant setting up, say a Hindu corporation to take the Hindus away, he could have nothing to do with it. "The burden should lie entirely on the majority community and the Government. When they declare their



bankruptcy of wisdom, the minority should go if they were adequately compensated.”<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

The Muslim opposition reached its culmination at Bishkatali — a small village with a Hindu population of 306 souls in the midst of a Muslim population of 4,694. The greater part of those who had left during the disturbances had still not returned to their homes. The owner of the house, where Gandhiji stayed, had temporarily returned because of Gandhiji's visit. The house itself had not escaped destruction. It had a fine library containing a number of hand-written books on religion — a symbol of the old cultural tradition of the district. During the disturbances this also was burnt. Along Gandhiji's route a number of hand-written posters were found stuck on the trees. Some of them read:

1. Remember Bihar  
And leave Tipperah immediately.  
We have warned you many times  
Still you are here.  
Go back; otherwise it would be the worse for you.
2. Go where you are wanted.  
Give up your hypocrisy and  
Accept Pakistan.
3. Muslim League Zindabad.  
Quaid-i-Azam Zindabad.  
Let there be Pakistan and  
Down with the Congress.

Even here the proverbial silver lining was not lacking. Adjacent to the house where Gandhiji stayed, there was the house of a Hindu family who had all along stayed there. A good Muslim of the village had protected them during the worst of the disturbances.

At the evening prayer gathering Gandhiji was asked: “If there is only one God why should there not be only one religion?”

“Because,” replied Gandhiji, “everyone has his own conception of God. For instance, I believe myself to be a Hindu but I know I do not worship God in the same manner as many of the Hindus do.”<sup>8</sup>

The next day at Kamalapur, he was asked: “You advocate inter-caste marriage. Do you also favour marriage between Indians professing different religions? Should they declare themselves as belonging to no denomination, or can they continue their old religious practices and yet intermarry? If so, what form should the marriage ceremony take?”

Gandhiji's reply showed how far he had travelled from his earlier position on the question. Although he had not always held that view, he replied, he had long come to the conclusion that an inter-religious



marriage was a welcome event whenever it took place. Marriage in his estimation was a sacred institution. Hence there must be mutual friendship, either party having equal respect for the religion of the other. There was no room in this for conversion. Hence the marriage ceremony could be performed by the priests belonging to either faith. But this could come about only when the communities had shed mutual enmity and cultivated equal regard for all religions of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Was not the institution of civil marriage a negation of religion and did it not tend to laxity in faith?

He did not believe in civil marriages, replied Gandhiji. But he welcomed the institution of civil marriage as a much needed reform to clear the way for inter-religious marriages.<sup>10</sup>

“You say, you are in favour of inter-religious marriages, but at the same time you say that each party should retain his or her own religion. Are there any instances of parties belonging to different religions keeping up their own religion after such marriage to the end of their lives?”

Gandhiji replied that he had no instances in mind where parties had clung to their respective faiths “till the end of their lives” because the parties he had in mind were still living. He had, however, known men and women who professing different religions had married, each clinging to his or her own faith without abatement. But must people depend upon precedents always? he asked. Why should they not set up precedents of their own, so that the timid ones might shed their timidity?<sup>11</sup>

### 3

Char Krishnapur, which Gandhiji visited next, was in the heart of the Char area. Char means an island brought into existence in the bed of a river by the shifting of the river-bed. Char area in Noakhali and Tipperah is the gift of the Meghna river, with its lazy, silt-laden, ever-shifting current. The bulk of the population of Char Krishnapur consisted of Namashudras (Harijans). The Muslims numbered only 200. The Namashudras had suffered terribly during the disturbances and the reign of terror had continued long after other parts had been relieved.

In contrast with the preceding stages of the journey, where the population was predominantly Muslim, the entire route to Char Krishnapur was lined by eager crowds of men and women. The prospective host of Gandhiji at Char Krishnapur, too, was a Muslim, but he had changed his mind at the eleventh hour as, he said, he felt helpless in the face of the pressure that was being brought to bear upon him by a section of the Muslims. Accommodation for Gandhiji, in consequence, had to be found in a low-roofed shelter improvised from charred, corrugated sheets salvaged from a burnt-down homestead. To keep off the heat it was covered with green twigs. Still it was oppressively warm and stuffy inside.



Reports had been coming in for some time past from various centres showing that the situation was deteriorating. Secret meetings of Muslims were being held, pressure was being brought to bear upon complainants to withdraw their complaints. There was organised propaganda of a uniform, virulent type to boycott the Hindus. It had put out of occupation large numbers of Hindu fishermen, betel-leaf growers, weavers, petty shop-keepers, etc., in the villages. Of late it had been extended to Hindu agriculture. Those who disapproved of these tactics were branded as "fifth-columnists" and threatened with ostracism and reprisals, whether they were Hindus or Muslims. The logical consequence of a widespread and successful boycott could only be compulsory exodus of the Hindus. Continued toleration of this state of affairs by the Bengal Government could only precipitate a crisis. Gandhiji felt it was high time that these tactics were firmly met and the issue brought to a head. Already some people were beginning to ask in despair whether partition of Bengal was not the only answer in the circumstances.

With the return of spring, reported Dr. Amiya Chakravarty after a visit to Gandhiji, "nature has put forth beauty, there is a haze of blue *Kalai* on the soil and the flaming *Shimul* greets Gandhiji as he takes a fresh turn into the village but the human background is one of recalcitrance. To Gandhiji . . . it is no surprise that the situation should externalise even to the same point, before the human truth is revealed. . . . Gandhiji does not believe that any situation is unchangeable. What is unchangeable is the fact that human nature returns to normality if it is given the opportunity to so do."<sup>12</sup>

"If I did not believe it, I would not be here," remarked Gandhiji to Dr. Chakravarty. "Those who think of separation must know where we stand. . . . If boycott is the policy of the Government, we must know about it. A community cannot take action by itself. Bengal as well as other Provinces must understand this. . . . Even if I fail, truth will not have failed. I must strive and carry this issue towards light. I live or perish in the attempt. Noakhali and Tipperah are not an isolated problem, but it is a problem which India must solve for herself and for humanity. Fortunately or unfortunately, I have had success in the most difficult ventures of my life. But I do not know what will happen this time. The greatest trial is given to us but it is never beyond our power to overcome it."

"As Gandhiji moves along," concluded Dr. Chakravarty, "a new dynamic touches the entire area. . . . Tomorrow the road leads further into the Char areas. The Scheduled Caste sufferers are waiting for Gandhiji in surroundings of village desolation. The stage is set for Haimchar where urgent issues will converge."

\* \* \*

He continued to burn his candle at both ends. His diary of 24th February contains the following tell-tale entry:



After the morning prayer, tried to study the outline of Bengali numeral one and to improve the outline of the second numeral. Next struggled unsuccessfully for about ten minutes to understand the distinction between *Nio* and *Nao* (future imperative and present indicative respectively of the Bengali verb "take"). In the meantime Manu brought orange juice. Put the same question to her. She, too, failed to give a satisfactory explanation. That accounted for another ten minutes. Sent for Nirmal Babu. Put the poser to him in turn. He fared a little better but in the end he, too, gave up perplexed. In between he handed Sardar Gill's file. That started a conversation about Gill. This went on till 6.35. Wrote a letter to A. Then lay down to rest for about ten minutes; got up at 7.25, inspected the trench latrine and set out on the day's march.

Since he had set out on foot from Srirampur on the 2nd January, Gandhiji had visited 49 villages in Noakhali district and 7 in Tipperah, covering a total distance of 116 miles. It had become a familiar sight in the countryside day after day and week after week to see him emerge from his hut with his bamboo stick in hand, punctually at the scheduled time and set out on his journey. He tried to befriend every Muslim he met on the way. In the villages were co-workers engaged in the work of re-establishing peace and economic and social reforms under his plan. They came to him with their reports to seek advice and guidance. He met the women of both the communities. To the Hindu women he appealed to banish from their midst the demon of untouchability for which more than their men folk, they were responsible. Muslim women did not come to him. So he visited them in their homes wherever possible and bade them discard *purda* and come out of their seclusion. To both Hindus and Muslims — men and women — he appealed to shed fear and live together as members of one family.

Muslims, in the bulk, kept away from his prayer meetings, but it was often noticed that though they did not actually enter the prayer ground, they stood near enough so as not to miss what he said. If invited, they would very often come in and beckon others to follow them. As the tour progressed, it became more and more clear that side by side with the hostile section there was beginning to emerge another section among the Muslims that was well disposed towards his mission and was not afraid to come out into the open with its views.

Individually, however, the Muslims — particularly the poor class — took to him kindly and soon learnt to shed their feeling of strangeness. They instinctively recognised him as one of them, who could think in their terms and understand their problems, and on whose wisdom and sincerity they could rely. They felt at home with him, and enjoyed his kindly, infectious good humour, which they found irresistible. During his visit to a Muslim house in one of the places in the Char area, a Muslim friend brought to him a green twig with two varieties of leaves on it and asked: "How is it, Bapuji, that the same twig bears two different



kinds of leaves?" "That is how things happen in nature," replied Gandhiji with a smile. "It is the same with Hindus and Muslims; they have sprung from the same stock and share a common destiny!" And the whole assembly roared with laughter.

On another occasion a Muslim asked him to interpret a dream which he had had five years ago! Gandhiji wrote on a slip of paper that he was sorry, he was an ordinary mortal and no interpreter of dreams and visions. The Muslim friend, however, went away happy beyond words to receive a reply in the Mahatma's own hand.

"The dead-set at me is getting fiercer," ran a letter by Gandhiji. "But to face such attacks joyously and unflinchingly has been my business in life. My present *yajna* is one of utmost self-purification. It may be my last." In the course of a conversation with a friend, who had come with some important despatches from New Delhi, he remarked: "I do not want to die . . . of a creeping paralysis of my faculties — a defeated man. An assassin's bullet may put an end to my life. I would welcome it. But I would love, above all, to fade out doing my duty with my last breath." One of his letters to a friend described him as "trekking over unfurrowed tracks in stormy weather". He might have in this way gone on for ever. But flesh and blood have their limits and nature has put a wise check on man's striving. For some time past he had been complaining of a "drumming sound" in the ears — a red signal in high blood pressure to which he was prone. Under the advice of friends at last he agreed to make a prolonged halt at Haimchar to recoup himself.

The stay at Haimchar lasted for 6 days. It enabled him to gather up the loose ends of various problems that had been engaging his attention since his arrival in Noakhali.

There was a vast gathering mostly consisting of Namashudras at the prayer gathering on the day of his arrival at Haimchar. Thakkar Bapa had described to him the destruction that had been wrought upon Harijans in the Char area. He had spoken to him, too, of serious social evils such as child-marriage, taboo on widow-remarriage and the diseases resulting from promiscuity as a result that were rampant in their midst. Gandhiji spoke with a heavy heart. He told them that their betterment would not come from the legislatures or from any other outside agency but their own effort. They must not regard themselves as fallen or "untouchables". The so-called higher castes were the really guilty ones. If the so-called untouchables realised this, they would never fall into the mistake of snobbishly imitating the evil customs and habits of the higher classes so-called. He reminded them of what the late Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya used to say, namely, that children of God should be content to earn an honest *cowrie* (penny) and eat what it could procure. That would bring them true happiness, untouchability would become a thing of the past, and the higher castes so-called would be ashamed of their sin against them.



He was deeply sorry to hear of their sufferings, he told them, but they must not bemoan their lot. They were used to hard labour or should be. They might plead with the authorities to do justice and that in time. But they should not give up if the succour did not come. They should trust to their strong hands and feet to set themselves up in life again. God always helped those who helped themselves. Their reliance must be on the living God and not on the ever-erring man.

Nurunnabi Chowdhury, the Relief Commissioner for Chittagong Division, in the course of a long speech, lasting for over an hour, at a meeting of the Peace Committee had elaborated an ambitious plan of village uplift work. He had further gone on to declare that he wanted "to live and work for the Kingdom of God". To Gandhiji all that seemed a bit unreal and beside the mark inasmuch as it ignored the issue of issues which stared them in the face, namely, the worsening relations between the Hindus and Muslims of Noakhali. The test of a good worker was not whether he was able to frame an imposing plan on paper, but whether he knew how to match his work to the human material and the resources available at the moment and to fit his particular bit into the large plan. A sound rule was to pick out a few items that were within one's reach and capacity and work them out in full while keeping the whole in view. The Relief Commissioner's plan aimed too high. First things should come first. Unless there was unity of hearts between the two communities, no plan however well designed could succeed. Personally, concluded Gandhiji, he would give first priority to the establishment of unity between the two communities, the lack of which had vitiated the entire atmosphere so that even in the meeting which the Relief Commissioner had addressed very few Muslims were to be seen.

## 4

Important developments had in the meantime taken place affecting the whole country. The Karachi resolution of the Muslim League had put an end to any further hope of the Muslim League coming into the Constituent Assembly. On the 9th February, 1947, Pandit Nehru wrote to Gandhiji: "The League resolution was about as bad as it could be. Perhaps there was a virtue in it for it makes the position quite clear. After this resolution it is even more difficult than before for us to carry on in the old way in the Interim Government. We are moving in the matter." The next day he again wrote: "We have informed the Viceroy that in view of the Muslim League resolution passed at Karachi, the League members cannot continue in the Government. There is really no answer to our charge and demand and the Viceroy realises it. He is awaiting instructions from London."

Commented the London *Times*: "The League, while apparently relying on the British declaration that a constitution framed by the



Constituent Assembly, not fully representative, cannot be enforced upon unwilling parts of India, may perhaps have lost from sight the not less significant undertaking that a minority cannot be suffered indefinitely to impede the progress of the majority.”<sup>13</sup>

Things after that moved swiftly to a close.

On the 15th February, Sardar Patel revealed in a Press interview that the Congress members of the Interim Government had asked H.M.G. either to require the Muslim League to share in drafting a new constitution or to leave the Cabinet. “Unless the Muslim League goes out, we will go out.” The step had been under contemplation for a long time. It was precipitated by the refusal of the Muslim League members in the Interim Government, who sat in the Lower House, to support the Government on an important division. The issue was a delicate one of taking punitive action on some turbulent elements in the North-West Frontier Province. To deal with such a vital issue of law and order upon purely communal lines was a danger-signal which no responsible body could ignore. Even the Conservative London *Times* was forced to observe that the behaviour of the two Ministers was “in fact idefensible”.

The British Government were faced with a difficult situation. The proposition put forth by the Congress, Sir Stafford Cripps had admitted in the House of Commons, “accorded with the facts of the case”. But they felt that whatever might be the rights and wrongs of the situation, it was not “wise to precipitate a decision upon it so long as there was any hope of all parties meeting in the Constituent Assembly.” A decision, however, could now no longer be postponed. The advice which they had received was that as things stood “British Raj cannot be maintained in its existing basis with adequate efficiency after 1948.”<sup>14</sup> “We must say clearly and unequivocally to India,” Major Wyatt had warned in the House of Commons debate on 12th December, 1946, “that on a certain fixed date, we are going to leave India with our troops, with our officials, and with any British residents who wish to go with us. We must announce that date before the administrative machinery was completely crumbled in our hands. . . . We cannot allow British troops to be dragged into either side in the civil war.” There were only two alternatives before the British Government, said Wyatt. Either they should attempt “to strengthen British control in India” on the basis of “expanded personnel in the Secretary of States’ services and considerable reinforcement of British troops” and be prepared to remain in India, perhaps for another 15 or 20 years, which “would arouse the most bitter animosity of all parties in India” or to declare that they could not continue their responsibility beyond a certain date and leave India.

In December, 1946, in a letter to a friend Gandhiji had written:

In my opinion for the British not to leave India till there is perfect peace in



the land seems to me to be an impossible dream. What they can and must do is to transfer the whole power to the willing and capable party and at the earliest moment to withdraw the British part of the army and disband the rest. They should not think of keeping any part for the protection of the British interests. These must be left to the goodwill of the people of India. This is the royal road to peaceful transfer and no other.

The logic of events at last drove the British Government very nearly to the same position. On the 20th February, 1947, Mr. Attlee made a statement in the Parliament that it was H.M.G.'s definite intention to take necessary steps to effect the transfer of power to responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June, 1948. Under the State Paper of 16th May, 1946, they had agreed to recommend to Parliament for adoption a constitution that might be framed by the Constituent Assembly. But if a constitution in terms of the Cabinet Mission plan was not worked out by a "fully representative Constituent Assembly before that time," Mr. Attlee went on to say, "H.M.G. will (would) have to consider to whom the powers of the Central Government in British India should be handed over on the due date, whether as a whole to some form of Central Government for British India or in some areas to the existing Provincial Governments or in such other way as may seem most reasonable and in the best interest of the Indian people."

Simultaneously with it was announced the termination of Lord Wavell's appointment as the "war-time" Viceroy and the appointment of Lord Mountbatten as his successor. In spite of the formal compliments paid to him on the termination of his service, his recall, as Mr. Churchill at that time said, was a virtual dismissal. As early as December, 1946, Mr. Attlee had come to the conclusion that Wavell had to go if their Indian policy was not to suffer a complete ship-wreck. As a legacy to his successor Lord Wavell left behind a political deadlock worse than ever; a spreading communal violence and organised lawlessness that had already engulfed three of the major Provinces; a Central secretariat that was well-nigh split from top to bottom into two factions with members of the Viceroy's personal staff and other high British officials taking sides, and a crumbling machinery of administration in which infiltration of communalism in a fairly advanced stage was already in evidence. On the credit side his sole contribution, as Mr. Attlee put it, was "nothing more constructive than a military evacuation plan."<sup>15</sup> But of that more later.

Giving his first reaction to H.M.G.'s statement, Gandhiji wrote to Pandit Nehru on the 24th February:

Evidently I had anticipated practically the whole of it....My interpretation of the speech (of Attlee) is this:

1. Independence will be recognised of those parts which desire it and will do without British protection;



2. The British will remain where they are wanted;
3. This may lead to Pakistan for those Provinces or portions which may want it. No-one will be forced one way or the other. The Congress Provinces, if they are *wise*, will get what they want;
4. Much will depend upon what the Constituent Assembly will do and what you as the Interim Government are able to do;
5. If the British Government are and are able to remain sincere the declaration is good. Otherwise it is dangerous.

In other words, the future would depend on India's capacity to take up the challenge of independence in terms of the Quit India resolution for which Gandhiji had been trying to prepare them, and of the British Power's willingness to retire unconditionally, leaving India to her fate, and its capacity to get the services to implement that decision loyally and impartially in letter and in spirit.

Putting it into the context of his mission in Noakhali, in the course of his first prayer gathering at Haimchar, Gandhiji observed that whatever might have been the history of British rule in the past, there was not a shadow of doubt that the British were going to quit India in the near future. The statement put the burden on the various parties of doing what they thought best. It was up to them to make or mar the situation. Nothing could overturn their united wish. So far as he was concerned, he was emphatically of opinion, he said, that if the Hindus and Muslims closed their ranks and came together without external pressure, they would not only affect the future of India but probably the whole world. It was time, therefore, that Hindus and Muslims should determine to live in peace and unity. The alternative was a civil war which would only serve to tear the country to pieces. He did not know what the future had in store for them, he concluded, but if the people really, sincerely and with a pure heart wished unitedly for a particular thing, speaking in human language, one could say that God being servant of His servants would Himself carry out their will.

On the same day on which Gandhiji wrote to Pandit Nehru, Pandit Nehru wrote to Gandhiji from New Delhi:

You must have seen my statement on the new declaration made by the British Government. The statement was considered carefully by all our colleagues in the Interim Government minus, of course, the Muslim Leaguers. . . . Mr. Attlee's statement contains much that is indefinite and likely to give trouble. But I am convinced that it is in the final analysis a brave and definite statement. It meets our oft-repeated demand for quitting India. . . . Matters will move swiftly now or at any rate after Mountbatten comes. . . . The Working Committee is meeting on the 5th March. . . . Your advice at this critical moment would help us greatly. But you are too far away for consultation and you refuse to move out of East Bengal. Still if you could convey to us your ideas on the subject, we would be very grateful.



In his next letter on 28th February Pandit Nehru wrote:

The Working Committee is meeting here soon and all of us were anxious to have you here on the occasion. We considered the question of sending you a joint telegram appealing to you to come. But we decided ultimately not to send it. We felt sure that you would not come at this stage and our telegram would only be an embarrassment.

But though we are not sending the telegram we feel very strongly that your advice during the coming critical weeks is most necessary. It is possible of course for one or two of us to visit you but that is not a satisfactory way of doing things. It is a full discussion among all of us that we would have liked to have. At present it is exceedingly difficult for any of us to leave Delhi even for two or three days. For several to go together would upset work completely. There is the budget in the Assembly, the Committees of the Constituent Assembly, the negotiations with the Princes, the change in Viceroys and so many other things that demand constant attention. So we cannot go away and if you will not come how are we to meet?

But Gandhiji literally believed in the dictum that one can serve the whole universe by doing one's allotted task steadfastly and well, and that it is better for one to die in the performance of one's own immediate duty than to allow oneself to be lured away by the prospect of the "distant scene", however attractive. A letter he wrote to Sardar Patel ran: "I may not be able to prove it to you but I am convinced that my work here is of supreme importance. All of you veterans are there putting your shoulder to the wheel. . . . I am the only figure among ciphers here. Allow me, therefore, to continue here. If I can achieve something worthwhile, the whole country will be benefited; if I fail none will be any the worse for it."<sup>16</sup>

To Maulana Saheb, who had suggested to him to make Calcutta his headquarters if he could not come and stay at Delhi, he replied: "If the Ahimsa about which I have written so much and which I have striven to realise in practice all these years does not answer in a crisis, it ceases to have any value in my eyes. Your affection prompts you to say that if only I were near you, all would be well. The truth however is that so long as I cannot make good here, I can be of no use anywhere."<sup>17</sup>

"My walking pilgrimage," he wrote to a European friend Mrs. Edmond Privat, "gives me immense peace of mind. The upshot I do not know nor do I care to know. Man has no control over results. That is the sole prerogative of God. Hence I can sing with Cardinal Newman:

I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me."<sup>18</sup>

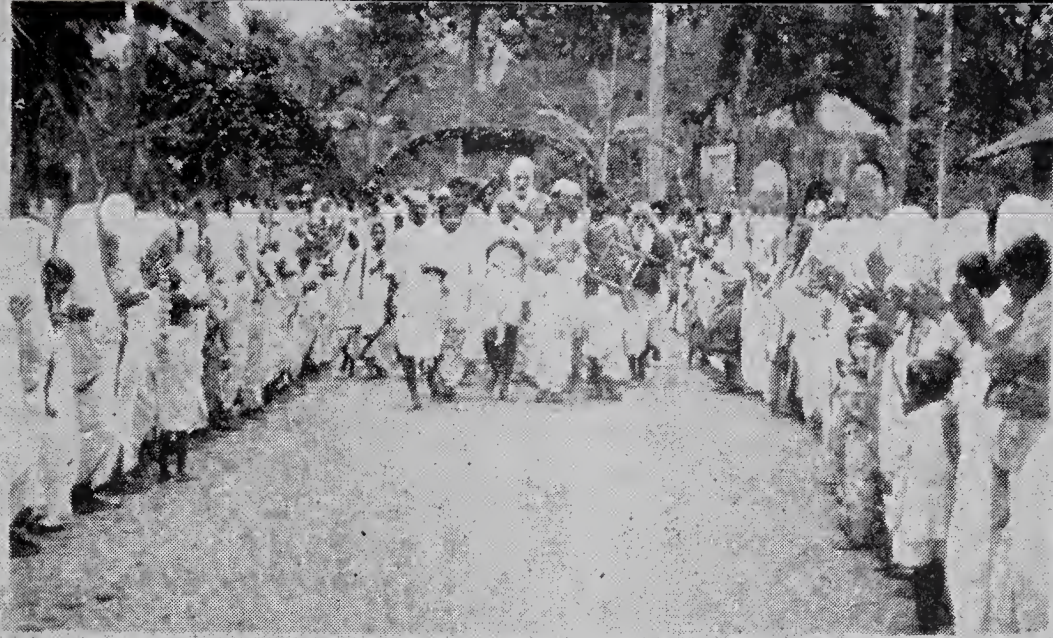
Gandhiji's persistent refusal to come to Delhi, till his mission in Noakhali had borne fruit, created a dilemma for the Congress leaders.



It was vividly expressed in one of Pandit Nehru's letters: "I know that we must learn to rely upon ourselves and not run to you for help on every occasion. But we have got into this bad habit and we do often feel that if you had been easier of access our difficulties would have been less."<sup>19</sup> But Gandhiji's position remained unchanged: "I know that if I were free I could take my share in trying to solve the various problems that arise in our country. But I feel that I should be useless unless I could do something here. . . . We are all in the hands of the Power which we call God."<sup>20</sup>

In the end, it was neither his nor Pandit Nehru's will that prevailed but, as he had put it to Pandit Nehru, "the Power which we call God". He was decreed to be neither in Noakhali nor in Delhi but in Bihar.

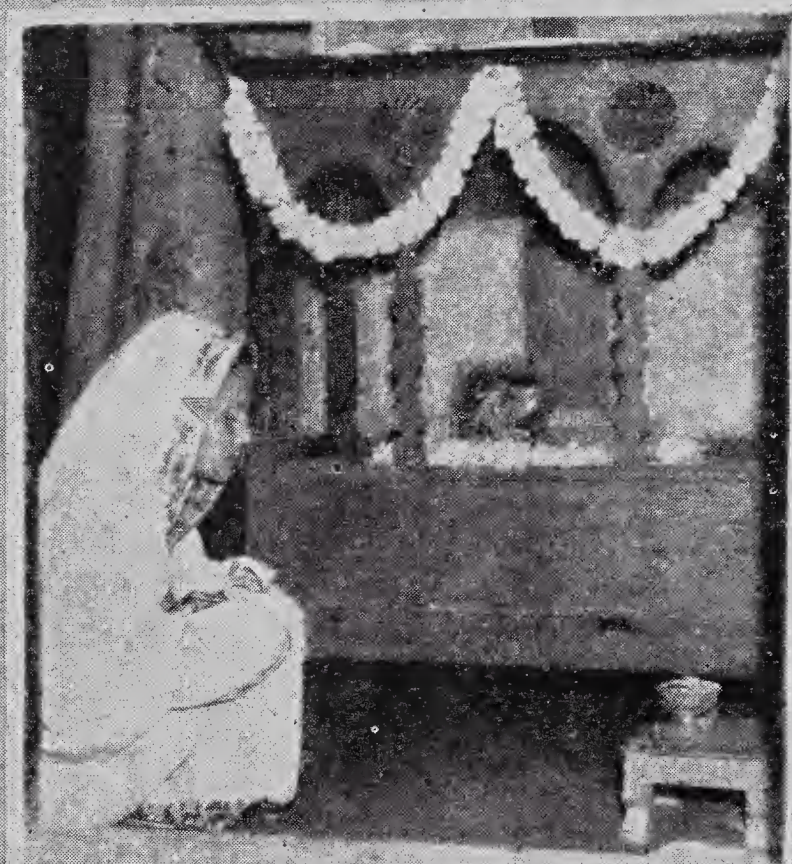




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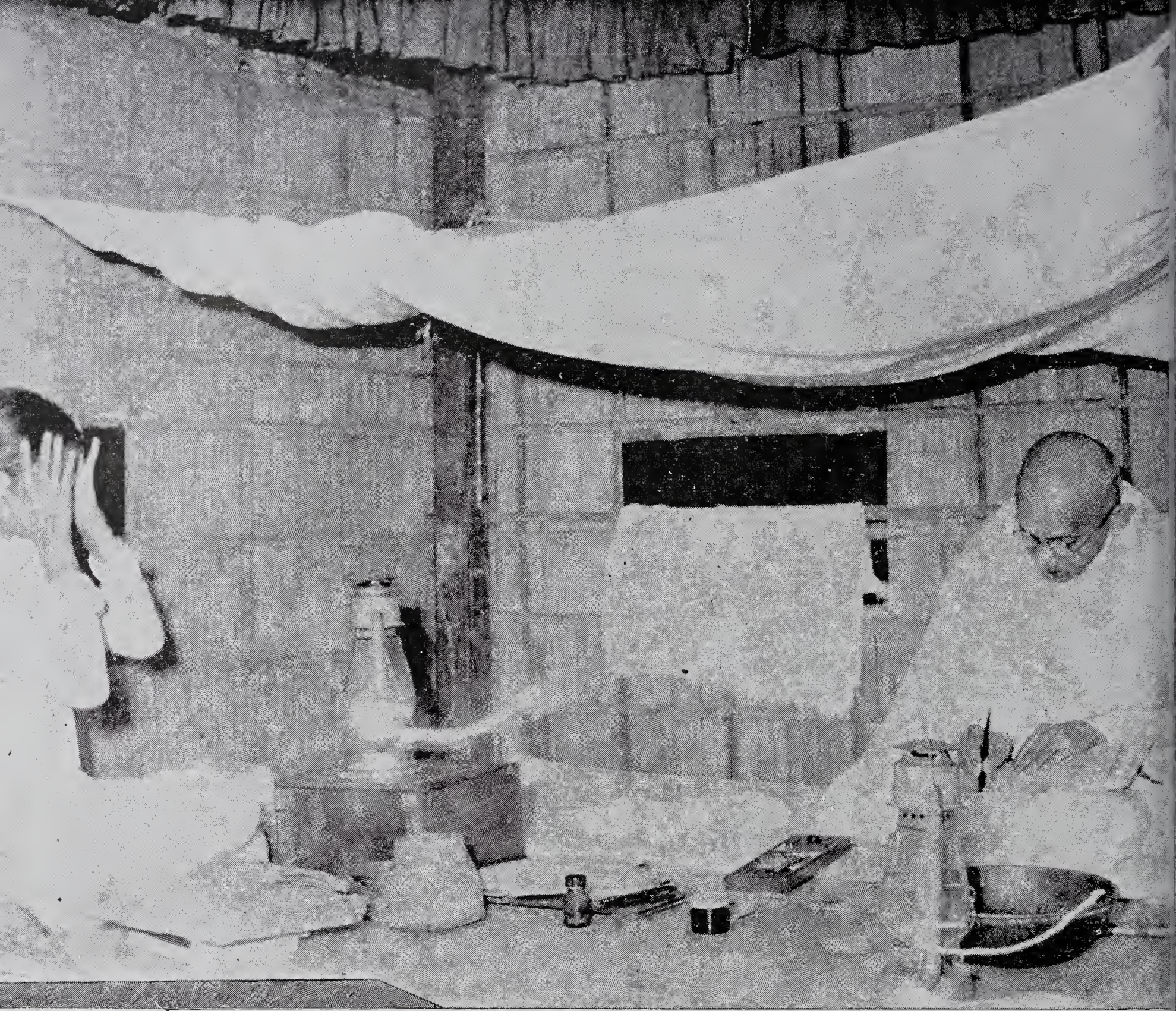
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*Slow leaven.* "Slowly and steadily the leaven worked." (page 56) 1. Women receiving Gandhiji with Harikirtan. 2. Comforting orphaned children. 3. The lady of the house rapt in prayer in a renovated family temple. (page 147) 4. Gandhiji being welcomed by women with dance and song. (page 56)

[ONE





TWO]

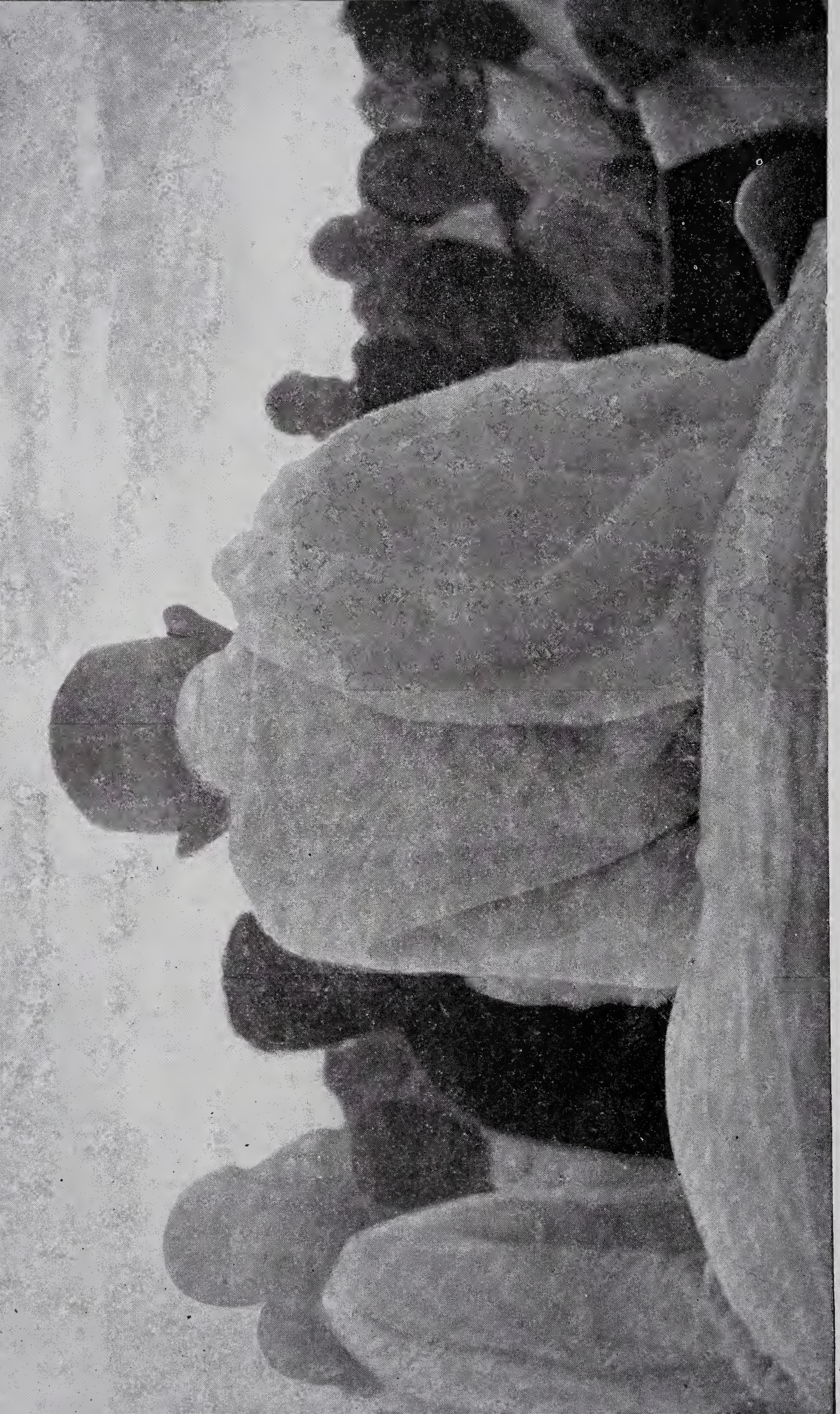
“Got out of his bed to face the day at half-past two.” (page 118)



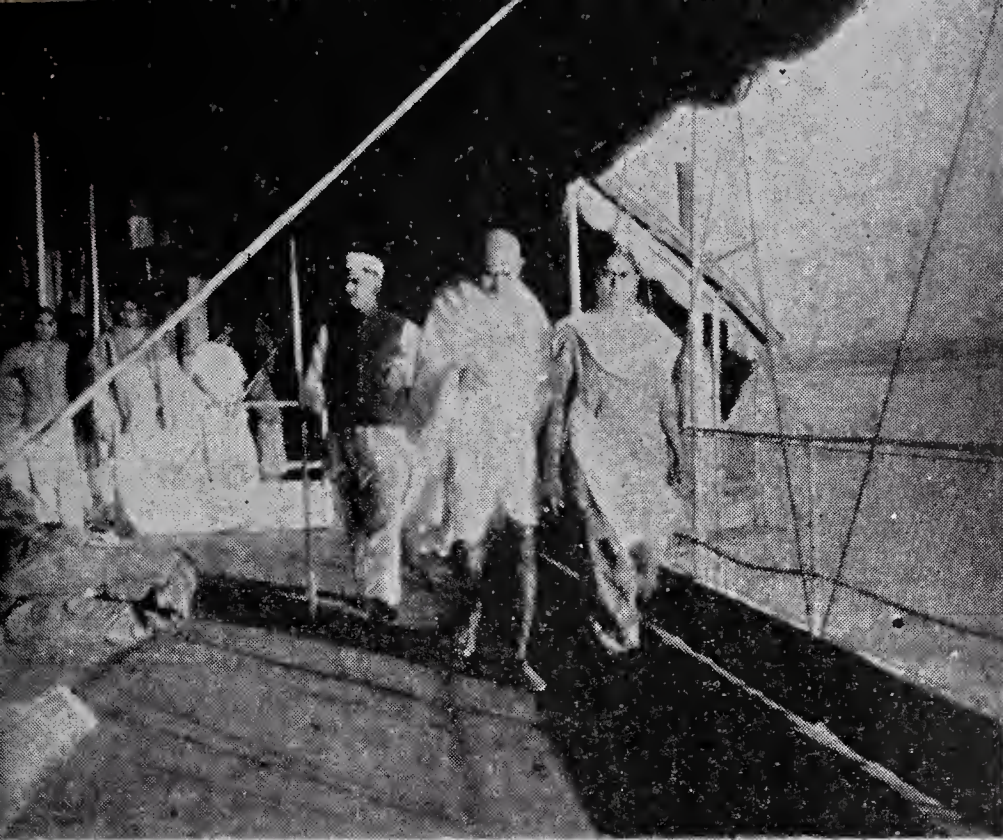


1. Amtus Salam breaking her fast by taking orange juice at Gandhiji's hands. (page 157) [THREE
2. "Local Muslims met Gandhiji . . . and . . . asked what assurance on their part would satisfy Amtus Salam." (page 156)









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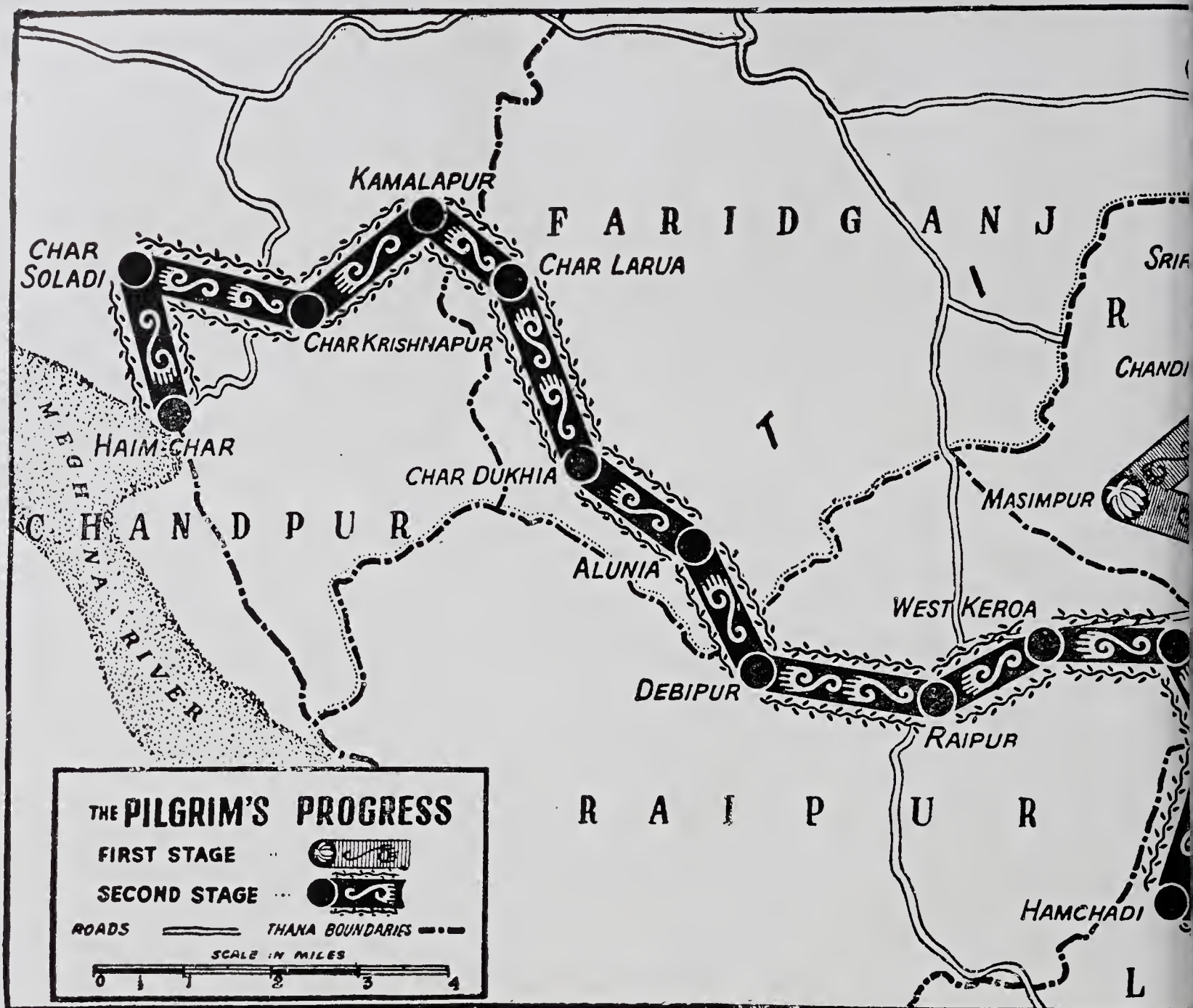
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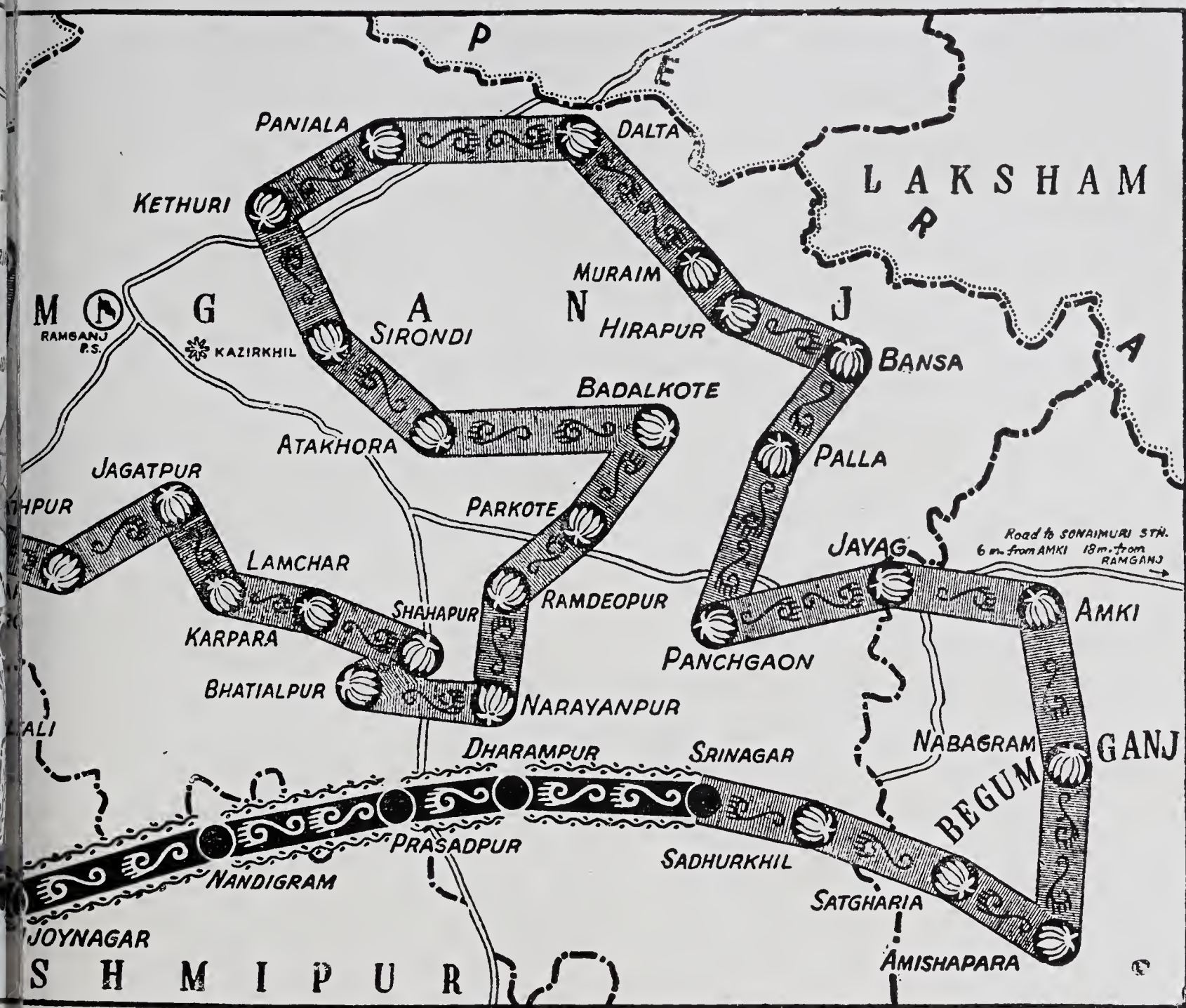
Last days in Noakhali. 2. Visiting Jumma Mosque at Raipur. (page 180)  
 3. Muslims lining the road to greet Gandhiji. 4. Last prayer at Haimchar.  
 Sitting next to Gandhiji on dais is Thakkar Bapa and standing on the  
 extreme left, Nirmal Bose. 1. Crossing Padma by steamer *en route* Bihar.





Map showing Gandhiji's walking





ough Noakhali and Tipperah.

[SEVEN





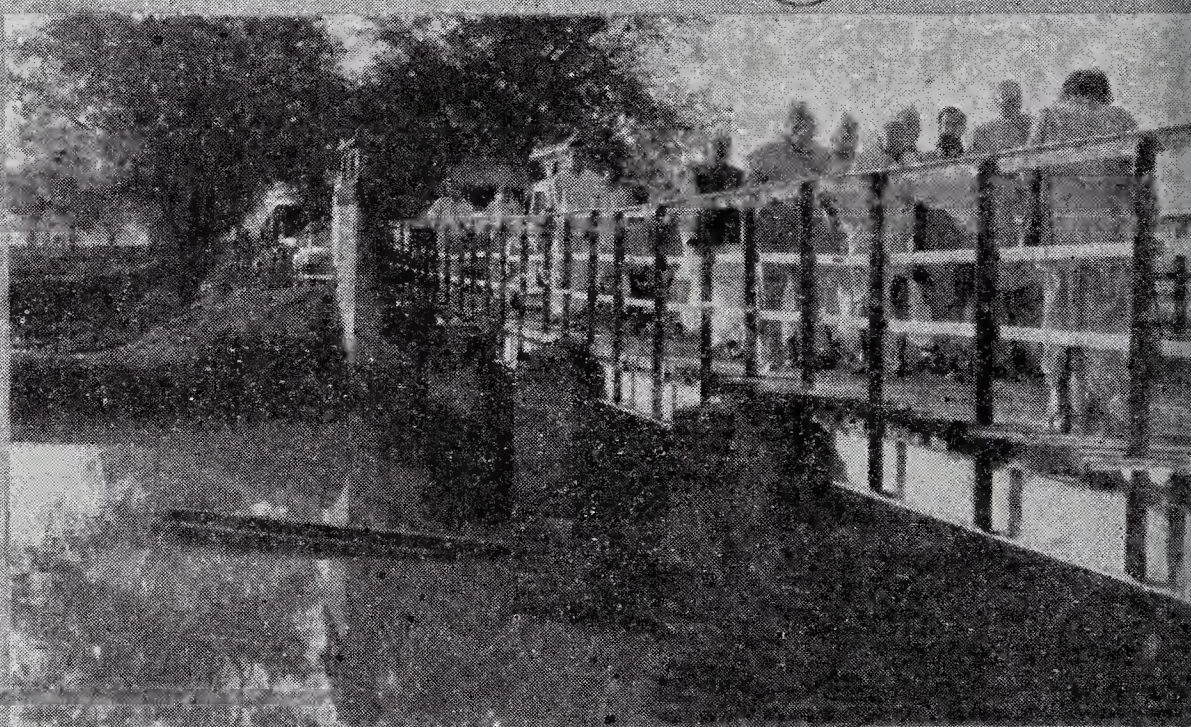
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EIGHT] *Pilgrim's Progress.* 1, 2 & 3. Through devastated Bihar, and 4, 5 & 6. Through devastated Noakhali.





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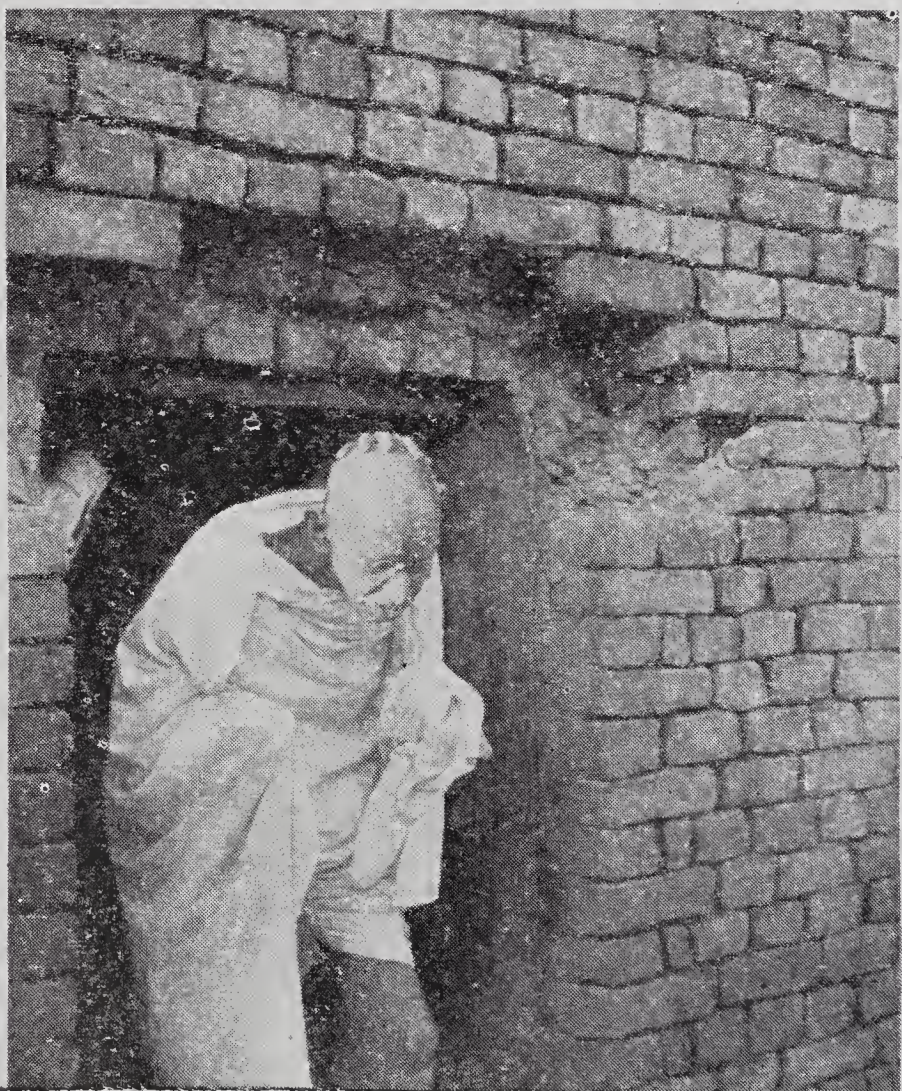
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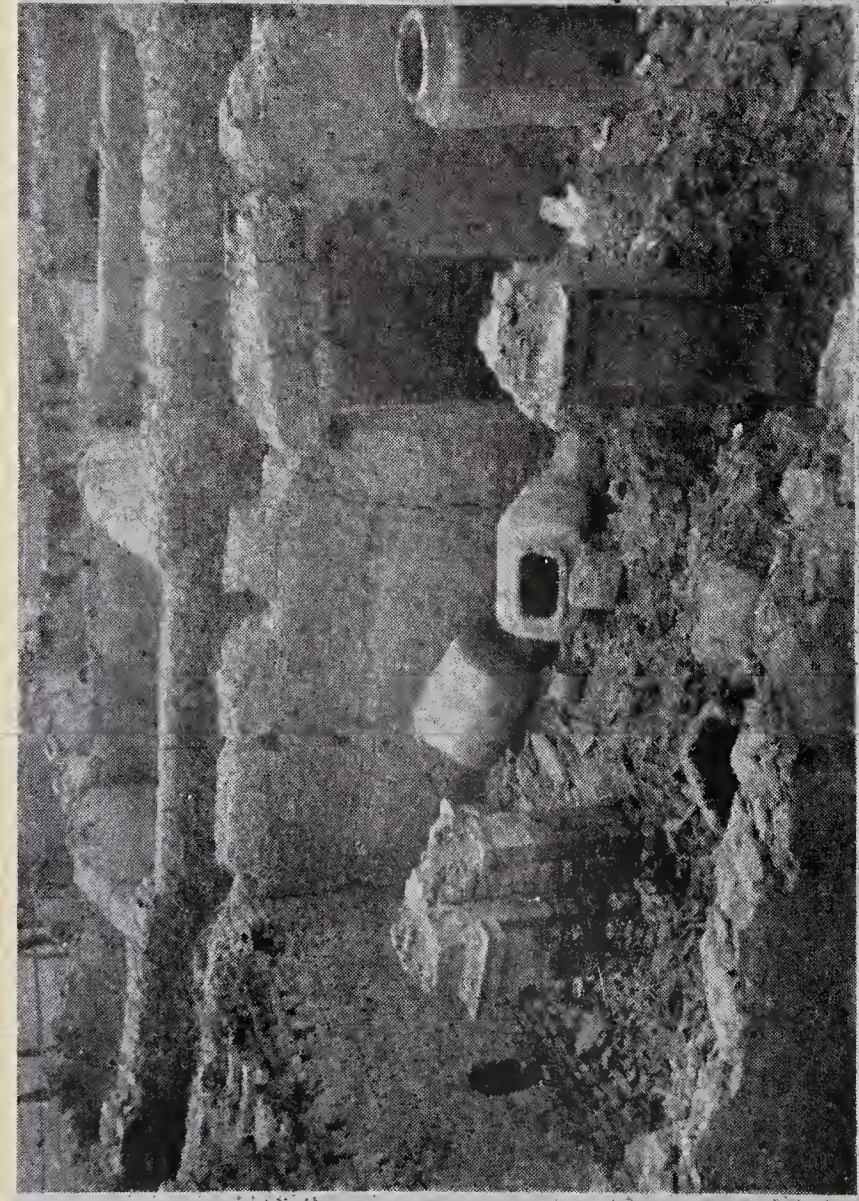


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*The Greater the Sinner the Greater the Saint.* 1, 2 & 3. At Masaurhi in Bihar. "Almost every house had been razed to the ground." (page 295)  
4. Coming out of a ruined house; Manu tries to protect his head by covering it by her hand. 5. On a morning walk. "Within a few yards flowed the Ganges, calm and resplendent." (page 256)

[NINE





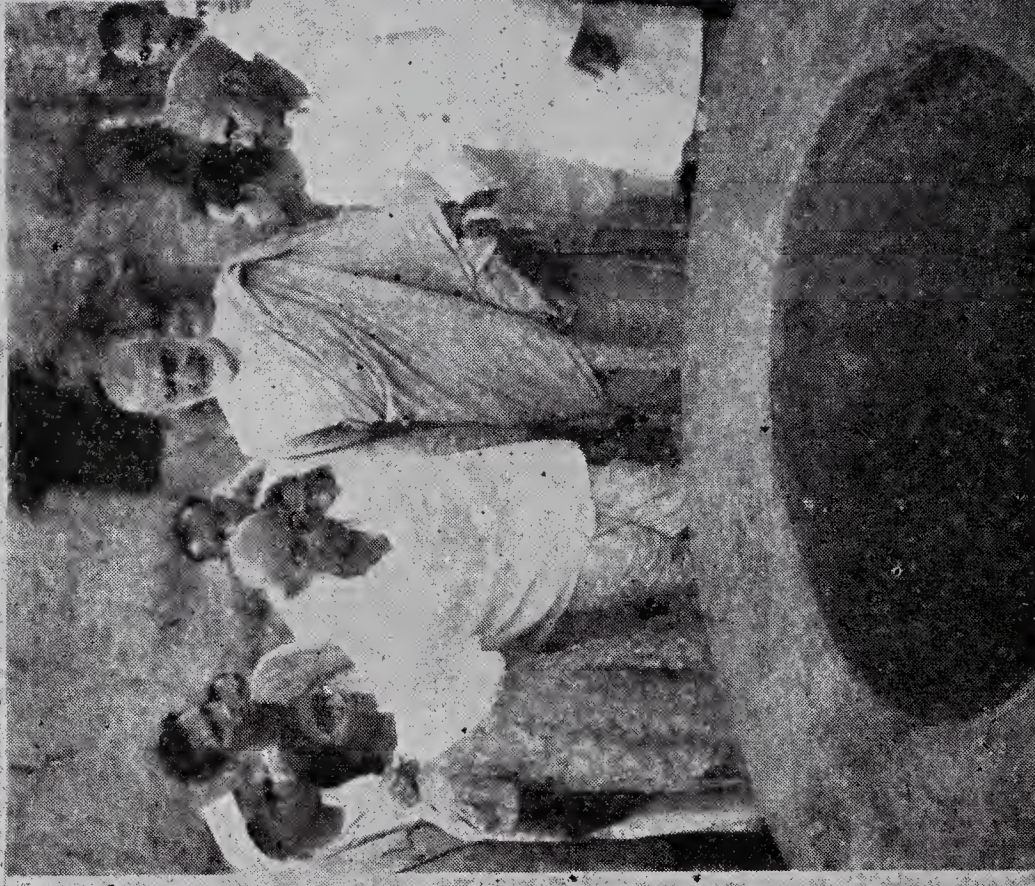
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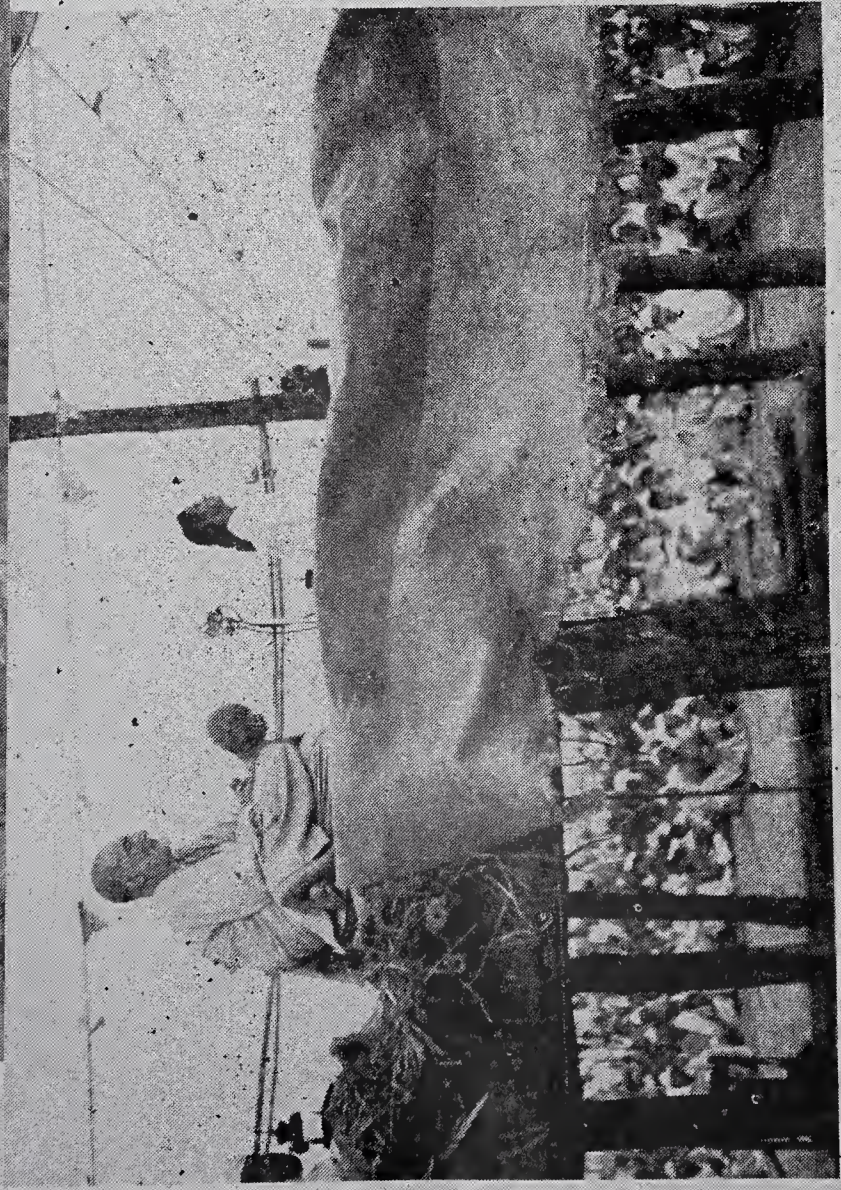
*Rebuild what you have Destroyed.* "People went to bathe in the Ganges to wash off their sins. The ruins before them were a reminder of the sin they had committed." (page 302) 1, 2 & 3. "Lanes of the dead." (page 300) 4. A well of death choked with the corpses of riot victims.



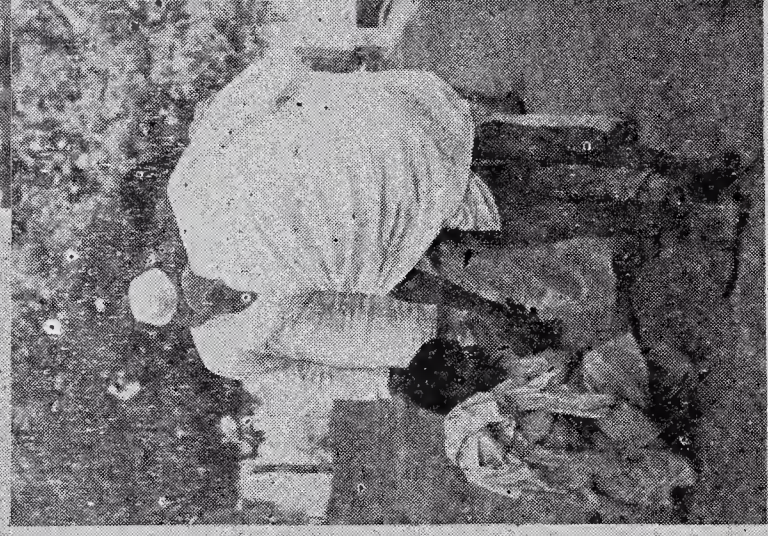


Badshah Khan with Gandhiji and Dr. Mahmud. "He became a tower of strength to all in Bihar, standing four-square to every storm." (page 293)





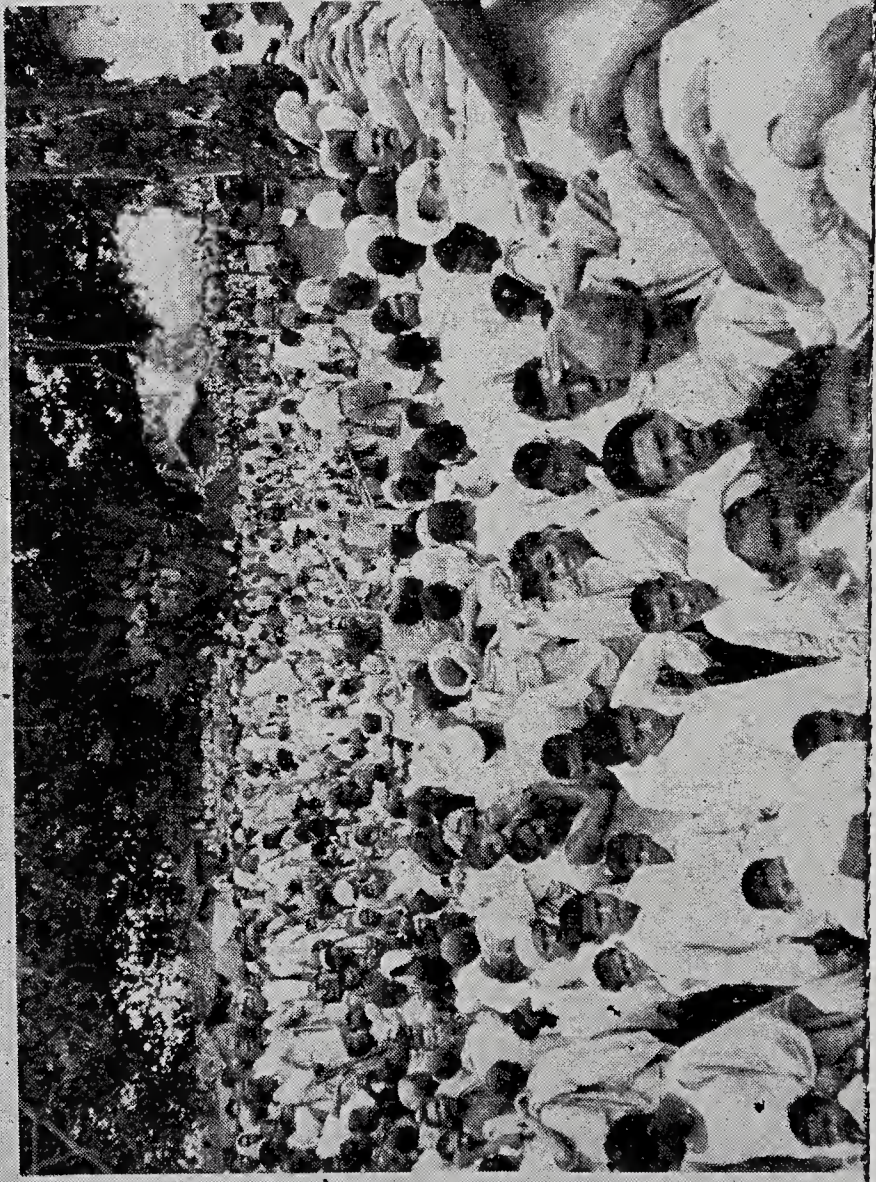
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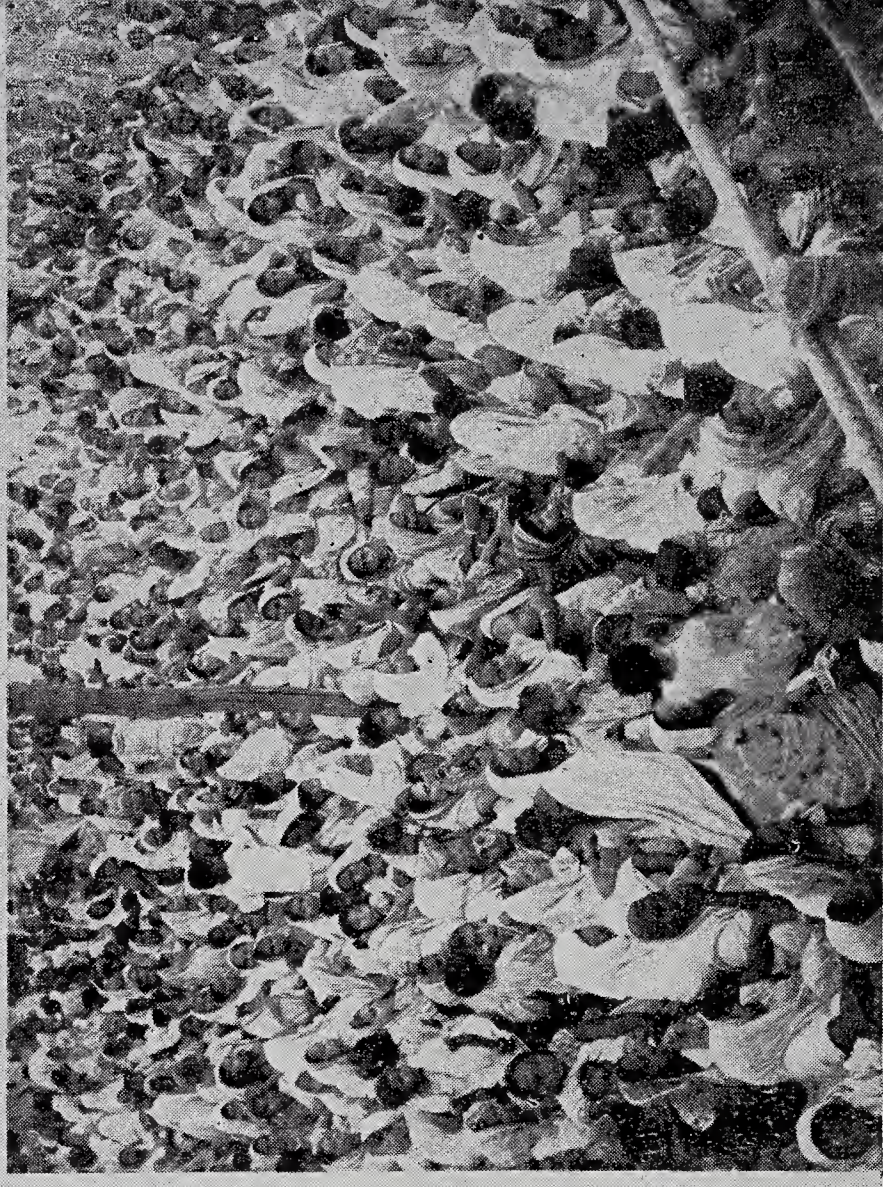
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## CHAPTER XI

### BRAHMACHARYA

#### 1

OF ALL THE issues that converged at Haimchar the most crucial one was about Brahmacharya.

Ahimsa, truth, non-possession, non-stealing and Brahmacharya are the five cardinal observances or disciplines prescribed in Hinduism for a striver after self-realisation. They were the five pillars on which Gandhiji's whole life and his philosophy of Satyagraha were built. But his approach to these ideals was not that of the orthodox moralist—he refused to accept the traditional interpretation of these disciplines—but of a scientific searcher after truth. He poured into them a meaning and content which sometimes left the orthodox gasping for breath. A case in point was when he got a lethal injection administered to an ailing calf to put an end to its agony and defended the destruction of pariah dogs and of rats when there was a danger respectively of rabies and plague spreading. His had been a revolutionary's outlook all through life. It had led him to challenge the existing order in economics, politics, and social relations—even in religion. He insisted upon subjecting everything to the strictest scrutiny and test. Ethics, morality, religion, even spiritual experience, he regarded as a fit field for inquiry, experimentation and research. And so Brahmacharya also came to be included in the ambit of his “experiments with truth”.

Brahmacharya in his case was a natural corollary to the law of love “which sublimates all desire as well as all possessiveness”<sup>1</sup>, the five basic disciplines being “five test points in what is a single commandment—to love all mankind as oneself.”<sup>2</sup> To treat one of them, namely sex, on the highest level of the law, viz., the law of love, and the rest on the pedestrian level of practical convenience, would be, as Gerald Heard points out, “to make an inconsistent reply and so produce an inconsistent life”.<sup>3</sup> All the five constitute an integral whole and are of equal importance. Gandhiji's striving for truth consisted in full practice of all of them.

He had adopted and practised the ideal of Brahmacharya since his youth. Brahmacharya literally means the mode of life or course of conduct adapted to the search for Brahma, i.e., Truth. Ahimsa or non-violence is the manifest part of Truth. Beyond the manifest there still remains her unmanifest part. But “even the *darshan* of Truth in her



non-violence manifestation can only be attained by the man of pure detachment. Anger, greed, pride, fear, all these things draw a veil across the seeker's eyes."<sup>4</sup> Brahmacharya, therefore, means simultaneous control of all the organs of the mind, body and speech — particularly sex. As conceived by him, *Brahmacharya is not complete until such a state is reached that no unwanted thought can arise in the striver's mind*. It came to occupy the place of honour in his discipline for Satyagraha. "Without Brahmacharya the Satyagrahi will have no lustre, no inner strength to stand unarmed against the whole world. . . . His strength will fail him at the right moment."<sup>5</sup>

There are certain rules laid down in the Shastras for the would-be Brahmachari — the so-called nine-fold wall of protection. Thus he may not live among women, animals and eunuchs; he may not teach a woman alone or even in a group, he may not sit on the same mat as a woman, he may not look at any part of a woman's body; he may not take milk, curds, *ghee* or any fatty substance or indulge in hot baths and oily massage. Gandhiji had read about these rules while he was in South Africa but his own approach to the ideal of Brahmacharya had not been by that way. He had come across men and women in the West who observed Brahmacharya but had never known that any of these restraints were necessary. Nor had he himself been any the worse for non-observance of the same. He mixed freely with members of the other sex. In South Africa he had brought up boys and girls under his care in the company of other boys and girls without interposing any barriers although the experiment, as he found to his cost, was not free from risks.

The aim of Ashram disciplines being to enable men and women who were drawn into the non-violent struggle to go forth into the fray with an added sense of security and freedom, Gandhiji felt that Brahmacharya that could not be sustained except in strict segregation was not worth much. It was the same, more or less, in regard to the other Ashram disciplines as well. For instance, the aim of accustoming oneself to simple, spice-free diet in the Ashram was to enable a Satyagrahi to go to his post of duty with the confidence that he would be able to subsist on whatever the locality might provide or what he himself could improvise out of locally available means, not to make of himself a nuisance to his hosts or to feel inhibited where his particular brand of cookery was not available. Similarly, if Brahmacharya instead of enabling a woman or a girl to go among and face even ruffians fearlessly — as they had often to do during Satyagraha struggles — made her run away from duty and seek security within the four walls of her home, it would stultify itself. The ideal, said Gandhiji, should, therefore, be that an Ashramite should have "the same freedom in meeting another as is enjoyed by a son in meeting his mother or by a brother meeting his sister. . . . The restrictions that are generally imposed for the protection of Brahmacharya are lifted in the Satyagraha Ashram, where we believe that Brahmacharya which ever stands in need of such adventitious support is no Brahmacharya at all.



The restrictions may be necessary at first but must wither away in time. Their disappearance does not mean that a Brahmachari goes about seeking the company of women, but it does mean that if there is an occasion for him to minister to a woman, he may not refuse such ministry under the impression that it is forbidden to him.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, such a Brahmachari “does not flee from the company of women. . . . For him the distinction between men and women almost disappears. No one should distort my words to use them as an argument in favour of licentiousness. . . . It must be so. . . . His conception of beauty alters. He will not look at the external form. He or she whose character is beautiful will be beautiful in his eyes. . . . Even his sexual organs will begin to look different. (They will remain as a mere symbol of his sex). He does not become impotent but . . . (internal) secretions in his case are sublimated into a vital force pervading his whole being. It is said that an impotent man is not free from the sexual desire. . . . But the cultivated impotency of the man, whose sexual desire has been burnt up and whose sexual secretions are being converted into vital force, is wholly different. It is to be desired by everybody.”<sup>7</sup>

The Ashram ideal in this respect thus involved to a certain extent “a deliberate imitation of life in the West”, where segregation of the sexes is not observed. He had even “grave doubts”, Gandhiji said, as to his competence to undertake such an experiment. “But this applies to all my experiments. . . . Those who have joined the Ashram after due deliberation have joined . . . fully conscious of all the risks involved therein. As for the young boys and girls, I look upon them as my own children, *and as such they are automatically drawn within the pale of my experiments*. These experiments are undertaken in the name of the God of Truth. He is the Master Potter while we are mere clay in His all-powerful hands.”<sup>8</sup> (*Italics mine*).

The result had been quite encouraging. Both “men as well as women have on the whole derived benefit from it. . . . The greatest benefit has in my opinion accrued to women.”<sup>9</sup> And this in spite of the fact that “some of us have fallen, some have risen after sustaining a fall.”<sup>10</sup> The possibility of stumbling, he maintained, was implicit in all such experimentation. “Where there is cent per cent. success, it is not an experiment but a characteristic of omniscience.”<sup>11</sup>

This was written in 1932. The limiting factor in these experiments, Gandhiji felt was his own immaturity. “A Brahmachari is one who controls his organs of sense in thought, word and deed. The meaning of this definition . . . is not quite clear even now, for I do not claim to be a perfect Brahmachari, evil thoughts having been held in restraint but not eradicated. When they are eradicated, I will discover further implications of the definition.”<sup>12</sup>

According to the Gita, sense-objects depart from one who starves or restrains the five senses but not the yearning for them. As St.



John of the Cross put it, "absense is not detachment if the desire remains"; detachment "consists in suppressing desire. It is this that sets the soul free, even though possession may be still retained."<sup>13</sup> This yearning, too, disappears, says the Gita, when one beholds the Supreme, Truth, Brahma or God — "not . . . with the physical eye" or by "witnessing a miracle. Seeing God means realisation of the fact that God abides in one's heart."<sup>14</sup> When that happens the attainment becomes permanent without the possibility of a fall.

Researches in Brahmacharya, as in the case of non-violence, are necessarily slow. New experiments can be made only in extraordinary circumstances and such circumstances are in the very nature of things rare. And so six more years elapsed. As the non-violent freedom struggle deepened and became long drawn out, Gandhiji again felt the need for experimentation as a necessary part of his striving.

The Congress had started with an initial handicap in 1920. Very few believed in truth and non-violence as a creed. Most members had accepted them as a policy. Gandhiji had hoped that many would accept them as their creed after they had watched the working of the Congress under the new policy. Only a few did. In the beginning stages the change that came over the foremost leaders was profound. Pandit Motilal Nehru and Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das in their letters from prison wrote to Gandhiji how they had experienced "a new joy and a new hope" in a life of self-denial, simplicity and self-sacrifice.

The Ali Brothers had almost become fakirs. As we toured from place to place, I watched with delight the change that was coming over the brothers. What was true of these four leaders was true of many others whom I can name. The enthusiasm of the leaders had infected the rank-and-file.

But this phenomenal change was due to the spell of "Swaraj in one year". The conditions I had attached to the fulfilment of the formula were forgotten . . . . I should have made sure that the conditions were such that they would be fulfilled . . . . I had no such prevision in me. The use of non-violence on a mass scale and for political purposes was, even for myself, an experiment . . . . My conditions were meant to be a measure of popular response . . . . Mistakes, miscalculations were always possible. Be that as it may, when the fight for Swaraj became prolonged . . . enthusiasm began to wane, confidence in non-violence even as a policy began to be shaken, and untruth crept in . . . . The evil . . . continued to grow.<sup>15</sup>

He began to look afresh for means which would enable him to tackle the evil effectively:

There is no such thing as compulsion in non-violence. Reliance has to be placed upon ability to reach the heart . . . . There must be power in the word of a Satyagraha general — not the power that the possession of limitless arms gives but the power that purity of life, strict vigilance and ceaseless application



produces. This is impossible without the observance of Brahmacharya. . . . *All power comes from the preservation of and sublimation of the vitality that is responsible for the creation of life.* This vitality is continuously and even unconsciously dissipated by evil or ever rambling, disorderly, unwanted thoughts. And since thought is the root of all speech and action, the quality of the latter corresponds to that of the former. *Hence perfectly controlled thought is itself power of the highest potency and becomes self-acting.* . . . If man is after the image of God, he has but to will a thing in the limited sphere allotted to him and it becomes. *Such power is impossible in one who dissipates his energy in any way whatsoever.*<sup>16</sup> (Italics mine).

Why did he lack that power? he asked himself. The answer again was: "I have not acquired that control over my thoughts that I need for my researches in non-violence. If my non-violence is to be contagious and infectious, I must acquire greater control over my thoughts. There is perhaps a flaw somewhere which accounts for the apparent failure of my leadership."<sup>17</sup>

Did the flaw consist in his limited conception or practice of the ideal of Brahmacharya about which he had said that "without Brahmacharya no-one may expect to see Him, and without seeing Him one cannot observe Brahmacharya to perfection?"<sup>18</sup> There were some who held that perfect Brahmacharya such as this, if it was at all attainable, could be attained only by cave-dwellers. "A Brahmachari . . . should never see, much less touch a woman." Even so they had said that absolute Ahimsa was only for the saint and the ascetic and altogether inapplicable to the present-day world. He joined issue with them: "Doubtless a Brahmachari may not think of, speak of, see or touch a woman *lustfully*. But the prohibition one finds in books on Brahmacharya is mentioned without this important adverb. The reason for the omission seems to be that a man is no impartial judge in such matters. . . . *It is not woman whose touch defiles man, but he is often himself too impure to touch her.* But recently a doubt has seized me as to the nature of the limitations that a Brahmachari or Brahmacharini should not put upon himself or herself, regarding contacts with the opposite sex. *I have set limitations which do not satisfy me. What they should be, I do not know.*"<sup>19</sup> (Italics mine).

And so he set out to discover them for himself. He had hoped to place his final conclusion arrived at as a result of his experiments before the public. But before he could do so, he quitted the mortal frame. In one of his books which came out posthumously, the following occurs:

I cannot say I have attained the full Brahmacharya of my definition but, in my opinion, I have made substantial progress towards it. If God wills it, I might attain even perfection in this life. . . . I do not consider thirty-six years too long a period for the effort. The richer the prize, the greater must the effort be. Meanwhile my ideas regarding the necessity for Brahmacharya have become stronger. Some of my experiments have not reached a stage when they might



be placed before the public with advantage. I hope to do so some day if they succeed to my satisfaction. Success might make the attainment of Brahmacharya (by others) comparatively easier.<sup>20</sup>

## 2

Woman to Gandhiji was the emblem of Ahimsa — non-violence — “weak in striking . . . strong in suffering”<sup>21</sup>; she had come to occupy a pivotal position in his plan of Satyagraha. He wanted to convert her self-sacrifice and suffering into *shakti* — power. In South Africa, as well as in India’s non-violent struggle for independence, she had played an equal part with men, if not greater. The deepest inspiration in his own life had been the piety and penance of his devout mother. His heart yearned for the “suppressed-half” of humanity. As he contemplated the scene around him, especially in India, a piteous spectacle met his gaze: “The physique of our girls is ruined through false modesty. We forget that the girls of today are the mothers of tomorrow. At a tender and critical stage in her development when she needs a mother’s understanding love and guidance most, she is given a step-motherly treatment as if she had sinned against society in growing up and must needs be suppressed. She is made a victim of hide-bound social rules and conventions. She can’t stir out, play, take outdoor exercise. The same about dress. She is made to follow the mode, put in tight laces, which deform her body and stunt her growth. She is kept in ignorance of the basic facts of life and in consequence dumbly suffers from various ailments through false modesty. The psychological harm that it does is even worse than the physical. She looks grey and old when she should be carefree and happy as a bird. It is a heart-rending spectacle. If in respect of their food, dress and conduct, conversation and reading, study and recreation, our girls could be brought up in nature’s healthy simplicity and allowed to grow in freedom, untrammelled by anything but the limits of natural modesty, they would rise to the full height of their stature and once more present us with a galaxy of heroes and saints such as India had boasted in the past. I have dreamt of such a race of ideal women who will be India’s pride and the guarantee of her future.”<sup>22</sup> He saw no hope for India’s emancipation while her womanhood remained unemancipated.

He held men to be largely responsible for the tragedy. In the course of his social reform work the realisation came to him, he told a woman worker, that if he wanted to reform and purify society of the various evils that had crept into it, he had to cultivate a mother’s heart. And so partly to expiate for a state of things in which as a man he felt he had a share, he became as mother in a special sense to one of them as he had been before to thousands of girls in a general way.

Manu Gandhi was his grand-niece. She was as a grand-daughter to him. She had lost her mother in her childhood. Kasturba Gandhi,



during her final illness in the Aga Khan Palace Detention Camp, had asked for her services. She was at the time undergoing detention in another prison. Sent for, she came and nursed her with rare devotion. In her she found the mother she had lost. Dying, Kasturba had entrusted her to Gandhiji, who became her "mother" in Kasturba's place. "I have been father to many," he wrote in one of his letters to her, "but to you I am a mother".

She was nineteen. She claimed to be a complete stranger to sexual awakening generally associated with a girl of her age. Gandhiji had come to have an uneasy feeling that either she did not know her own mind or she was deceiving herself and others. As her guardian and "parent", he had to guide her in life. As a "mother", he felt, he must know.

He held very strong views about the marriage of girls. In India orthodox parents frown upon the institution of spinsterhood. They do not encourage their daughters to remain unmarried after they have attained maturity. To Gandhiji all this was abomination. He wanted full freedom for girls to grow up and remain Brahmacharinis as long as they liked. But suppression is bad. He did not want to encourage suppression through false modesty. It was their bane and undoing. Where did Manu stand?

Girls often conceal their real feelings from their fathers but not from their mothers. Gandhiji had claimed that he was mother to her and she had endorsed the claim. If the truth of it could be tested, it would provide a clue to the problem that baffled him. Incidentally it would enable him also to know how far he had advanced on the road to perfect Brahmacharya — complete sexlessness.

For some time past she had drifted away from him. It had pained him. Soon after he came for his lone sojourn at Srirampur, in Noakhali, she had written to him wishing to return provided she could stay with him and serve him. He had decided to send away all his old companions. But he made an exception in her case, as part of his *yajna*. The condition was that she must be completely truthful and be prepared to go through any test that he might put her to. There were to be no mental reservations or secrets between them. He would not judge her in the sense that he would never put her away so long as she chose to remain with him and submit to his discipline. But she would be perfectly free to go away whenever she liked without forfeiting his affection. There was to be only one condition. *The moment he discovered that she was deliberately untruthful or had deceived him they must part company.* She had said that she literally regarded him as her *mother*, that she had experienced nothing but a mother's love in him. He accepted her word implicitly and decided to put her and himself to the test.

He did for her everything that a mother usually does for her daughter. He supervised her education, her food, dress, rest, and sleep. For



closer supervision and guidance he made her share the same bed with him. Now a girl, if her mind is perfectly innocent, never feels embarrassment in sleeping with her mother. If Manu was not what she claimed to be, he would know. He was aware of the fallacies that could vitiate the result. But there were ways of eliminating them. His definition of Brahmacharya was so wide and comprehensive ("There is something very striking about a full-fledged Brahmachari. His speech, his thought and his actions, all bespeak possession of vital force."<sup>23</sup>) that it would need a super-Brahmachari to fake it successfully.

He maintained that it was impossible for any girl to keep up the camouflage under his penetrating scrutiny for any length of time. If there was any flaw in him then, too, he would know. If there was no dross in her or in him she should grow from day to day in truthfulness and courage and wisdom. Her life should be a model of discipline, orderliness and self-control. There should be clarity in thinking and firmness in speech, qualities which she had hitherto lacked. The mind should be vigorous, alert, always fresh. There should be no fidgetiness, no mooning, no absent-mindedness or forgetting of duties; no laziness or mental sloth. Sleep should be calm, undisturbed, and natural like a child's. There should be steadiness and firmness in resolves and an even, unruffled temper. A joyous brightness should be on the face all the time. There should be no mental or physical fatigue, no infirmity, no illness. Above all, there should be no attachment or feeling of exclusive possessiveness, no jealousy or envy but pure single-minded devotion to duty.

It was suggested to him that in the very nature of things any result that the test might yield in the case under question would not be conclusive. Gandhiji said he was prepared for that, too. His technique had not only diagnostic value but therapeutic value also. A perfect Brahmachari is not only himself completely free from sex-feeling or sex-consciousness but he induces that state in members of the opposite sex with whom he comes in contact. If he had the requisite purity in him it should sublimate any residuary dross that, unknown to her, might be lurking within his grand-daughter. Patanjali says in his *Yogasutra* that in the presence of perfect non-violence all enmity ceases. Even so, argued Gandhiji, in the presence of perfect Brahmacharya all passions should flee. His own life provided a living demonstration of it. Young girls and women came to him without fear or a feeling of shyness and shared their innermost confidences with him. It enabled him to serve and help them as he would never have been able to otherwise.

He had made experiments before in Brahmacharya, as in Truth and Ahimsa. *But this came to him not as an "experiment" but as a matter of strict duty and so became a part of his penance or yajna*, as he called his venture of faith in Noakhali. But it provoked quite a storm. One of his co-workers, whom he had taken with him to Srirampur as a member of his entourage, asked to be relieved of his duties as a mark of dissent,



unless his viewpoint was conceded. Gandhiji told him that he was right in asking to be relieved in those circumstances. In a letter giving him leave to go, he wrote:

I have read your letter.... It contains half-truths which are dangerous. ... I cannot concede your demands. The other points you make do not make much appeal to me.... Since such is my opinion and there is a conflict of ideals, and you yourself wish to be relieved, you are at liberty to leave me today. That will be honourable and truthful. I like your frankness and boldness.... I was looking forward to taking a hand in bringing out your other qualities. I am sorry it cannot be.... I shall always be interested in your future and shall be glad to hear from you when you feel like writing to me. Finally, let me tell you that you are at liberty to publish whatever wrong you have noticed in me and my surroundings....

Friends asked Gandhiji how he could afford to lavish his time and attention on this when he was engaged in his great mission. "They think it is a sign of infatuation on my part," he remarked to Manu. "I laugh at their ignorance. They do not understand. I regard the time and energy spent on you as time and energy well spent. If out of India's millions of daughters, I can train even one into an ideal woman by becoming an ideal mother to you, I shall thereby have rendered a unique service to womankind. *Only by becoming a perfect Brahmachari can one truly serve the woman.*"

That to him implied his becoming one with womankind through the conquest and sublimation of sex. He once described himself as "half a woman". Mrs. Polak has noted specially in her reminiscences of him this trait of "sexlessness" which was so pronounced even during his South African days, and which enabled members of the opposite sex to shed their shyness in his presence.<sup>24</sup> "There are some things relating to our lives," remarked a highly educated, aristocratic, Indian society lady once, "which we, women, can speak of to, or discuss with, no man. But while speaking to Gandhiji we somehow forgot the fact that he was a *man.*"<sup>25</sup>

That trait of his had developed with time. He had ministered nature-cure treatment both to men and women in South Africa and in it, as everybody knows, there is no room for squeamishness. He had extended the practice on his return to India. In his Ashram at Sevagram he very often set male nurses to nurse women patients both Indian and European and *vice versa*. There were no "walls" in his Ashram, either at Sevagram or at Sabarmati. He had no private life". His most intimate functions were performed not in privacy. Thus, he had his massage practically naked, with young girls very often as masseurs. He often received visitors and even members of the Working Committee while stretched on the massage table. Similarly, while having hydropathic treatment, he allowed both men and women to assist him,



and any and almost everybody had free access to him in his bath. In his celebrated letter to Churchill, while appropriating as a compliment the disparaging epithet of the "half-naked fakir", which the Tory leader had applied to him, he went on to say that it was his ambition to become completely naked — literally as well as metaphorically — the latter being of course the more difficult. (See Vol. I, page 31).

There is in India's ancient philosophical lore the legend of Shukadeva who was born passionless, having attained complete sublimation from birth. Though he was young and went about naked, women felt no shame or embarrassment in his presence, whereas they did not feel free in the presence of Vyasa, his father, although he was old, very learned and known for his self-restraint. The reason given is that in spite of his tremendous self-control Vyasa had not yet attained that state of sexlessness or freedom from sex-consciousness which is the hall-mark of the perfect Brahmachari. And has not Jesus, too, referred to those "who become eunuchs for my sake"? "There are some eunuchs, who were so born from the mother's womb, some were made so by men, and some who have made themselves so for the love of the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>26</sup> Jesus, however, was careful to add that this truth was not practicable for everyone, it was only for those who have the gift. "Let anyone practise it for whom it is practicable."<sup>27</sup>

"The ideal of absolute Brahmacharya or of married Brahmacharya," said Gandhiji, "is for those who aspire to a spiritual or higher life; it is the *sine quo non* of such life."<sup>28</sup> Sexual intercourse for the purpose of carnal satisfaction is "reversion to animality" and it should be man's endeavour to rise above it. "But failure to do so as between husband and wife cannot be regarded as a sin or a matter of obloquy. Millions in this world eat for the satisfaction of their palate; similarly, millions of husbands and wives indulge in the sex act for their carnal satisfaction and will continue to do so and also pay the inexorable penalty."<sup>29</sup> Very few eat to live but they are the ones who really know the law of eating. Similarly, those only really marry who marry in order to experience the purity and sanctity of the marriage tie and thereby realise the divinity within."<sup>30</sup>

Gandhiji did not share the Christian ascetic view represented by the early Desert Fathers that "life itself was evil" or as St. Gregory of Rome put it: "If you marry you will have children and the larger number of them are more likely to be damned than to be saved — so it is a pity to have children"; nor that "by restraining sex-passion you suffer . . . (and) because Christ's sufferings — and not his teachings — are supposed to have rescued the world from everlasting torments . . . (therefore) to join in his suffering is a good thing in itself."<sup>31</sup> But he did come very close to the attitude which, according to Gerald Heard, "the Christian ascetics did understand — though not consciously that . . . apart from taking as little as possible out of life that others may have more . . .



austerity in food and continence in sex did make possible the type of high attention which true contemplation requires.”<sup>32</sup>

To sum up, while Gandhiji refused to regard marriage as a “fall from grace” in any sense of the term, or the instinct “to see oneself perpetuated through one’s descendants” to be “unlawful”, he did hold that the sexual act for mere pleasure’s sake was not compatible with the highest spiritual development. “Sex urge is a fine and noble thing. There is nothing to be ashamed of in it. But it is meant only for the act of creation. Any other use of it is a sin against God and humanity.”<sup>33</sup>

For himself, it was Gandhiji’s ambition literally to attain the state of complete sexlessness referred to by Jesus. His quest of truth could not be complete without it. It became an integral part of his Noakhali *yajna*.

### 3

He spent anxious days and nights turning the searchlight inward. He gave patient and earnest consideration to every viewpoint, every argument addressed to him. In his search for the Great Truth, he let all concerned understand that he needed the help and cooperation of all, particularly the dissenters and critics.

He put the matter to Horace Alexander. Since the death of G. F. Andrews, Gandhiji had more than once told Horace that he expected him to act as his English or Christian “mentor”. He now called on him as a Christian to give his reaction. Horace felt that as a test of Brahmacharya such an extreme step did not seem to be called for. Could not the test be carried out in a less extravagant way? He had never admired St. Simeon Stylites demonstrating his capacity for self-control from the top of a pillar: “Moderation in all things” was a good old motto. Gandhiji agreed that it was; St. Simeon Stylites was certainly not a model to be copied for he was conceited and bad-tempered. The step which he (Gandhiji) had taken was not taken to prove what *he* could do, but rather a necessary stage in his grand-daughter’s discipline. It was intended to test the full sincerity of her assurance to him. Incidentally, it would provide a test of his own. If his sincerity could impress itself upon her and evoke in her all the excellences that he aimed at, it would show that his quest of truth had been successful. *His sincerity should then impress itself upon the Muslims, his opponents in the Muslim League, and even Jinnah*, who doubted his sincerity to their own and India’s harm.

According to his wont, he took the public into confidence. In one of his prayer addresses he referred to “small-talks, whispers and in-nuendos” going round him of which he had become aware. He was already in the midst of so much suspicion and distrust, he told the gathering, that he did not want his most innocent acts to be misunderstood and misrepresented. He had his grand-daughter with him. She



shared the same bed with him. The Prophet had discounted eunuchs who became such by an operation. But he welcomed eunuchs made such through prayer by God. His was that aspiration. It was in the spirit of God's eunuch that he had approached what he considered was his duty. It was an integral part of the *yajna* he was performing and he invited them to bless the effort. He knew that his action had excited criticism even among his friends. But a duty could not be shirked even for the sake of the most intimate friends.<sup>34</sup> In a letter to Mirabeau he wrote: "The way to truth is paved with skeletons over which we dare to walk."<sup>35</sup>

Speaking on the same topic the next day, he told them, he had deliberately referred to his private life because he had never thought that the private life of individuals did not affect the course of the public activities. Thus, he did not believe that he could be immoral in private life and yet be an efficient public servant. His public conduct was bound to be affected by his private. He held that much mischief was made in the world by divorce between public and private conduct. When he was engaged in the supreme test of non-violence in his life, he wished to be judged before God and man by the sum total of his activities both private and public. He had said years ago that non-violent life was an act of self-examination and self-purification whether by an individual, a group, or a nation.

He sounded a note of warning on the third day. What he had said about his private life was not for blind imitation. He never claimed to have extraordinary powers. What he did was for all to do *if they conformed to the conditions observed by him. If that was not done those who pretended to imitate his practice were doomed to perdition.* What he was doing was undoubtedly dangerous but it ceased to be so if the conditions were rigidly observed. What those conditions were, he had summed up in his *Key to Health*: "The glorious fruit of perfect Brahmacharya is not to be had from the observance of . . . limited Brahmacharya (i.e., continence in the physical sense alone). But no-one can reach perfect Brahmacharya without reaching the limited variety."

He addressed numerous letters to intimate friends, inviting their criticism and opinion. One day he wrote as many as twelve letters full of the closest self-introspection all bearing on the same subject. One of the letters was to Acharya Kripalani, the then Congress President:

This is a very personal letter but not private.

Manu Gandhi my grand-daughter, as we consider blood-relations, shares the bed with me, strictly as my very blood . . . as part of what might be my last *yajna*. This has cost me dearest associates . . . You as one of dearest and earliest comrades . . . should reconsider your position in the light of what they have to say . . . I have given the deepest thought to the matter. The whole world may forsake me but I dare not leave what I hold is the truth for me. It may



be a delusion and a snare. If so, I must realise it myself. I have risked perdition before now. Let this be the reality if it has to be.

I need not argue the point. I have simply conveyed the intensity of my thoughts.

I suggest your discussing it with X and Y. And then come to a conclusion and let me know.... Do not consider my feeling in the matter. I have none. All I want is to *do* the truth at all cost, as I see it.<sup>36</sup>

The Acharya wrote in reply:

It is very kind and affectionate of you to have taken me in your confidence.... I had heard something of it... from several sources closely connected with you. However, whenever this topic was broached I put a stop to the conversation and I said I did not want to hear anything about these matters or discuss them.... I have a one-track mind. I confine myself to the work that is entrusted to me for the time being. Now that you yourself have written about the matter, I must give you my reaction for what it is worth.

These matters are, I find, beyond my depth. Moreover I have enough to do to keep myself morally straight to sit in judgment on others and specially those who are morally and spiritually miles ahead of me. I can only say that I have the fullest faith in you. No sinful man can go about his business the way you are doing. Even if I had a lurking suspicion, I would rather distrust my eyes and ears than distrust you. For I believe that my senses are more liable to deceive me than you would. So I remain unperturbed.

Sometimes I thought that... you may be employing human beings as means rather than as ends in themselves. But then I take consolation in the thought that that consideration cannot be absent from your mind and that if you are sure of yourself, no harm can come to them. Then knowing you to be a great student of the Gita I have wondered if you are not doing violence to the principle of *Loka Sangraha* (conservation of social good), wisely propounded therein. But this consideration, too, I am sure, must not be absent from your calculations, in this experiment of yours.

I have moulded my life, such as it is, away from you. My contacts with you have always been political. I have never consulted you about my personal life. Yet, you have powerfully affected my life for the better. I cannot live in the light of the doctrines I have learnt from you. But intellectually I am convinced that humanity's salvation lies that way. I have, therefore, been an humble interpreter of your thought to others in more modern and understandable terms. My only ambition in life today is to continue to be such an interpreter.... I can, I believe, never be disillusioned about you unless I find the marks of insanity and depravity in you. I do not find any such marks. I know your attitude to woman is the only right attitude, as you are one of those who consider her an end in herself and not merely as a means. You have never exploited her.<sup>37</sup>

But there were other equally noble and high-minded friends,



whose scepticism went deeper than that of the sardonic, irreverent Acharya. "You are a Mahatma," they argued, "but what about the other party?" Are not the lives of the saints full of stories of their temptation? They sought to absolve him by calling Manu the "Great Temptation"—the classical device which the Evil One and sometimes jealous gods use to thwart the penance of God's saints by deluding their minds. Gandhiji refused to accept the alibi. The aspersion was so grossly unjust and contrary to facts.

There were others who sought to draw a distinction between him and his associates. He was all right, but they were all wrong. Did it not show that his philosophy was at fault somewhere? Gandhiji disagreed. He could not be all right if his closest associates were all wrong. He claimed to know both the virtues and failings of his associates better than the critics.

The critics returned to the charge: "We are prepared to concede that *you* may advance spiritually by your practice, but it may be at the cost of the other party who lacks your discipline." "No," explained Gandhiji. "That is a contradiction in terms. There can be no spiritual advance at the cost of another. At the same time, reasonable risks must be taken, or mankind would never advance."

To illustrate his point, he struck a metaphor: When a potter sets about to make a pot of clay, he does not know whether on being fired in the furnace it will crack or come out well baked. It is inevitable that out of the lot which he puts into the furnace, many will break, some will develop cracks, while a few will come out hardened and well baked perfect pots. "I am like that potter. I work in hope and faith. Whether a particular pot will break or crack will depend upon chance and fate. It is not for the potter to worry. *His duty is over when he has taken reasonable care that the clay is of high quality*, free from impurities and grit, and the moulding shapely. But the result after that must be left entirely to God's keeping. If the clay selected is good and the potter has taken due precautions, his duty is over; the rest will take care of itself. But if the clay is unclean or gritty the pot will be awry and unshapely, and no care on the potter's part will avail anything. I have not knowingly done anything wrong in my life. Whenever I did anything wrong unknowingly, I made an open confession and suitable expiation as soon as I discovered it. Similarly, in the present case, if at any stage I should discover any impurity or dross in the clay I am handling or in myself, it would not take me a second to fling it away as a potter does a worthless pot, and to confess before the whole world my own unworthiness."

The critics held that Brahmacharya and for that matter any of the cardinal observances do not fall within the pale of experimentation. The basic rules of conduct will bear no tampering, or else society would go to perdition. Gandhiji disagreed. No ideal is static. Ideals to be living must grow and evolve with the evolution and growing needs of



society. He maintained that "experiments in Brahmacharya have been made before and are being made even today and that is as it should be." That being so, "in order to make progress, we have often to go beyond the limits of common experience. Great discoveries have been made possible only as a result of challenging the common experience or commonly held beliefs. The invention of the simple match-stick was a challenge to the common experience and the discovery of electricity confounded all preconceived notions. What is true of physical things is equally true of things spiritual. . . . It is our duty to investigate the hidden possibilities of the law of self-restraint."<sup>38</sup>

In the course of a letter to a friend he wrote: "I say you cannot tread this path (the path of Brahmacharya) if you fight shy of the thorns, stones and pitfalls in the way. May be we shall stumble, our feet will bleed, we may even perish. But we dare not turn back."<sup>39</sup> The path, he felt, need not be more difficult than that of Ahimsa, for instance, but it had been made needlessly difficult by "our ignorance of the subject with which needless secrecy is being associated." In the result "our thought is clouded. We dread to face consequences. We resort to half measures as if they were perfect or final and thus render them most difficult of execution. If our thoughts were clear, if we became sure of our ground, our speech and action would be free."<sup>40</sup> He was certain that the subject of sex was capable of being handled without any inhibition in a clean, decent manner. The trouble is, he said, that a lot of what passes for sex today "has nothing to do with sex".<sup>41</sup> It is pornography, pure and simple. Any way, his own way was clear. "If I am successful, the world will be enriched by my venture. If on the other hand I am found to be a fraud or a misled fool, the world will reject me and I shall be debunked. In either case the world will be the gainer. This is as clear to me as two and two make four."

In the eighteen nineties, when as a youth Gandhiji was still trying to discover himself he had been deeply influenced by Edward Maitland's *The Perfect Way*. In that book the founder of the Esoteric Christian Union, interpreting the statement in the Book of Genesis that God created man "in his own Image—Male and Female", a belief shared by mystics and modern psychiatrists alike—says that this implies that in order to be made in the image of God, the individual "must comprise within himself, the qualities—masculine and feminine—of existence, and be spiritually both man and woman". The symbolism of the soul's progress from the state represented by Eve to that represented by Virgin Mary is explained as follows:

Only when she has exchanged the innocence that comes of ignorance, for the impeccability that comes of full knowledge, is she no longer in danger of relapse.<sup>42</sup>

Like many other things that Gandhiji had absorbed in this extremely



formative phase of his career, this doctrine had sunk deep into his mind and become an integral part of his philosophy of life. A person who goes out of his way to seek contact with the other sex to test his strength, he told the objectors, is a fool if not worse. But a person who runs away from a necessary contact on the score of his Brahmacharya is a coward and an impostor; no Brahmachari at all. In the course of a dialogue he remarked: "Brahmacharya that cannot stand examination or shrinks from the test, when the occasion demands it, is no Brahmacharya. Even the sight of a nude woman will not affect a perfect Brahmachari and *vice versa*. Do not we see unsophisticated little boys and girls . . . freely mix with one another, play together, bathe together and even sleep together in perfect innocence because carnal desire in them has not yet been awakened? In the case of a perfect Brahmachari, there will be the same complete, childlike innocence in spite of full sex knowledge. That state can only be said to have been established when a man can lie by the side even of a Venus, in all her naked beauty, without being physically or mentally disturbed. When the Gopis were stripped of their clothes by Krishna, the legend says, they showed no sign of embarrassment or sex-consciousness but stood before the Lord in rapt devotion.

"Let me again explain. There is first the innocence of the child. He has no knowledge or consciousness of sex-distinction. It is innocence rooted in ignorance. But the perfect innocence of a grown-up person, who has full knowledge and understanding of sex, is true Brahmacharya. Such a perfect Brahmachari will be proclaimed by the lustré on his face, he will be a stranger to infirmity or disease. He will manifest in full measure all the marks of a *sthitaprajna*. And when finally he dies, it will not be as a result of sickness, his death will be a 'sleep and a forgetting'. He will retain his faculties unimpaired till the end and keep on doing His work and taking His name with his last breath. These are some of the signs by which a perfect Brahmachari will be known."

## 4

Of a different order and almost a class by himself was the venerable, septuagenarian Amritlal Thakkar, popularly known as Thakkar Bapa. Gandhiji was in the habit of having around him a number of conscience keepers. Thakkar Bapa was one of them. He was prevailed upon by some of Gandhiji's dissenting friends to strive with him. The meeting took place soon after Gandhiji's arrival at Haimchar, on the 25th February, 1947:

Bapa: "Why this experiment here?"

Gandhiji: "You are mistaken, Bapa; *it is not an experiment* but an integral part of my *yajna* (*Italics mine*). One may forgo an experiment, one cannot forgo one's duty. Now if I regard a thing as a part of my *yajna* — a



sacred duty—I may not give it up even if public opinion is wholly against me. I am engaged in achieving self-purification. The five cardinal observances are the five props of my spiritual striving. Brahmacharya is one of them. But all the five constitute an indivisible whole. They are inter-related and inter-dependent. If one of them is broken, all are broken. That being so, if in practice I resile in regard to Brahmacharya to please Mrs. Grundy, I jettison not only Brahmacharya but Truth, Ahimsa and all the rest. I do not allow myself any divergence between theory and practice in respect of the rest. If then I temporise in the matter of Brahmacharya, would it not blunt the edge of my Brahmacharya and vitiate my practice of truth? Ever since my coming to Noakhali, I have been asking myself the question, ‘What is it that is choking the action of my Ahimsa? Why does not the spell work? May it not be because I have temporised in the matter of Brahmacharya?’ ”

Bapa: “Your Ahimsa has not failed. Do not miss the wood for the trees. . . . Just think what would have been the fate of Noakhali if you had not come. The world does not think of Brahmacharya as you do.”

Gandhiji: “If I accept your contention then it would amount to this that I should give up what I hold to be right for me, for fear of displeasing the world. I shudder to think where I should have been if I had proceeded like that in my life. I should have found myself at the bottom of the pit. You can have no idea, Bapa, but I can well picture it to myself. I have called my present venture a *yajna*—a sacrifice, a penance. It means utmost self-purification. How can there be that self-purification when in my mind I entertain a thing which I dare not put openly into practice? Does one need anyone’s approval or permission to do what one holds with all one’s being to be one’s duty? Under the circumstances, there are only two courses open to friends. Either they should have faith in me, in the purity of my motives and my *bona fides*, even though they are unable to follow or agree with my reasoning, or they should part company with me. There is no middle course. *I dare not shrink from putting into action the logical implications of my conviction when I am launched on a sacrifice which consists of the full practice of truth.* Nor must I hide or keep my convictions to myself. That would be disloyalty to friends. Let X, Y and Z, therefore, go the way they choose, but how can I run away from the test? My mind is made up. On the lonely way of God on which I have set out, I need no earthly companions. Let those who will, therefore, denounce me, if I am the impostor they imagine me to be, though they may not say so in so many words. It might disillusion millions who persist in regarding me as a Mahatma. I must confess, the prospect of being so debunked greatly pleases me. Thousands of Hindu and Muslim women come to me. They are to me like my own mothers, sisters and daughters. But if an occasion should arise requiring me to share the bed with any of them, I must not hesitate,



if I am the Brahmachari that I claim to be. If I shrink from the test, I write myself down as a coward and a fraud.”

Bapa: “What if your example is copied?”

Gandhiji: “If there is blind imitation or unscrupulous exploitation of my example, society will not and should not tolerate it. But if there is sincere, *bona fide*, honest endeavour, society should welcome it and it will be the better for it. As soon as my research is complete, I shall myself proclaim the result to the whole world.”

Bapa: “I for one cannot imagine anything base in you. After all, Manu is in place of a grand-daughter to you—flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone. I confess, I had my mental reservations in the beginning. I had come in all humility to press upon you my doubts. I did not understand. Only after our talk today have I been able to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of what you are trying to do.”

Gandhiji: “Does that make any real difference? It does not and it should not. You seem to make a distinction between Manu and others like her. My mind makes no such distinction. To me they are all alike—daughters.”

The conversation had an unexpected sequel. Manu came and told Gandhiji that although to begin with Thakkar Bapa had doubts as to the propriety of what Gandhiji was doing, his six days’ close contact and observation had completely dispelled his doubts and he was convinced that there was nothing wrong or improper in his practice or with anyone concerned with it and he had written to that effect to his friends, too. He had further told her that what, more than anything else, had brought about his conversion was the sight of their perfectly innocent and undisturbed sleep, as he watched them from day to day, and her (Manu’s) single-minded and tireless devotion to duty. She, therefore, saw no harm in conceding Thakkar Bapa’s request to suspend the practice for the time being, provided Gandhiji agreed. She made it absolutely clear that mentally she was entirely at one with Gandhiji, that *she had renounced nothing, surrendered not an iota. The concession was only to the feelings and sentiments of those who could not understand his (Gandhiji’s) stand and might need time for new ideas to sink into their minds.* (Italics mine.) Gandhiji readily agreed. He saw in it lack of perspicacity on her part. But what did it matter—after all she was inexperienced, and the practice was for the time being discontinued.

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That was, however, not the end. As Gandhiji had pointed out to Thakkar Bapa, it made no fundamental difference in his position. Two friends sought him out in Bihar to strive with him and had a series of talks with him spread over five days.

“Why did you not, according to your wont, take your co-workers into confidence and carry them with you before embarking on this novel practice? Why this secrecy?”



Gandhiji: "No secrecy was intended. Everything was fortuitous. Previous consultation with friends was ruled out by the very nature of the thing. Besides I hold that previous consent was unnecessary. At the same time I should have insisted on ventilating the matter thoroughly at the very start. If I had only done that, much of the present trouble and commotion would have been avoided. The omission was a serious flaw. I was thinking within me as to what would be an appropriate penance for it when Thakkar Bapa came. You know the rest of the story."

"The irreparable harm, if you weaken the foundation of the moral order on which society rests and which has been built up by long and painful discipline, is obvious. But no corresponding gain is apparent to us to justify a break with the established tradition. What is your defence? We are not out to humiliate you or to score a victory over you. We only wish to understand."

Gandhiji: "No moral progress or reform is possible if one is not prepared to get out of the rut of orthodox tradition. By allowing ourselves to be cribbed by cast-iron social conventions, we have lost. The orthodox conception of the ninefold wall of protection in regard to Brahmacharya is in my opinion inadequate and defective. I have never accepted it for myself. In my opinion even *striving* after *true* Brahmacharya is not possible by keeping behind it. For 20 years I was in the closest touch with the West in South Africa. I have known the writings on sex by eminent writers like Havelock Ellis and Bertrand Russell, and their theories. They are all thinkers of eminence, integrity and experience. They have suffered for their convictions and for giving expression to the same. While totally repudiating institutions like marriage etc. and the current code of morals—and there I disagree with them—they are firm believers in the possibility and desirability of purity in life independently of those institutions and usages. I have come across men and women in the West who lead a pure life although they do not accept or observe the current usages and social conventions. My research runs somewhat in that direction. If you admit the necessity and desirability of reform, of discarding the old, wherever necessary, and building a new system of ethics and morals suited to the present age, then the question of seeking the permission of others or convincing them does not arise. A reformer cannot afford to wait till others are converted; he must take the lead and venture forth alone even in the teeth of universal opposition. I want to test, enlarge and revise the current definition of Brahmacharya, by which you swear, in the light of my observation, study and experience. Therefore, whenever an opportunity presents itself I do not evade it or run away from it. On the contrary, I deem it my duty — *dharma* — to meet it squarely in the face and find out where it leads to and where I stand. To avoid the contact of a woman, or to run away from it out of fear, I regard as unbecoming of an



aspirant after true Brahmacharya. I have never tried to cultivate or seek sex contact for carnal satisfaction. I do not claim to have completely eradicated the sex feeling in me. But it is my claim that I can keep it under control."

"We are not aware of your ever having put before the people at large these ideas of yours. On the contrary we have all along known you to put before the public ideas with which we are familiar, and which we have associated with your striving. What is the explanation?"

Gandhiji: "Even today, so far as the people in general are concerned, I am putting before them for practice what you call my old ideas. At the same time, for myself, as I have said, I have been deeply influenced by modern thought. Even amongst us there is the Tantra school which has influenced Western savants like Justice Sir John Woodroffe. I read his works in Yeravda prison. You have all been brought up in the orthodox tradition. According to my definition, you cannot be regarded as true Brahmacharis. You are off and on falling ill; you suffer from all sorts of bodily ailments. I claim that I represent true Brahmacharya better than any of you. You do not seem to regard a lapse in respect of truth, non-violence, non-stealing etc., to be so serious a matter. But a fancied breach in respect of Brahmacharya, i.e., relation between man and woman, upsets you completely. I regard this conception of Brahmacharya as narrow, hidebound and retrograde. To me Truth, Ahimsa and Brahmacharya are all ideals of equal importance. They all call for an equal measure of striving on our part, and lapse in respect of any of them is to me a matter of equal concern. I maintain that my conduct in no way constitutes a departure from the true ideal of Brahmacharya. As against it, Brahmacharya which reduces itself to a system of prescriptive do's and don'ts and which is in vogue amongst us today has a baneful effect upon society; it has lowered the ideal and robbed it of its true content. I deem it my highest duty to put these prescriptive conventions and taboos in their proper place and to release the ideal from the fetters that have been put upon it."

"One last question. If your attitude and practice constitutes such an advance in the cultivation of true self-restraint, why does not its beneficial effect show in your surroundings? Why do we find so much disquiet and unhappiness around you? Why are your companions emotionally unhinged?"

Gandhiji: "I know well the shortcomings as well as virtues of my companions. You do not know their other side. You jump to hasty conclusions from superficial observation, which is unbecoming in a striver after truth."

With deep emotion, he continued: "I am not so lost as you seem to think. I can only ask you to have faith in me. I cannot give up at your bidding what to me is a matter of deep conviction. I am sorry, I am helpless."



"We cannot say we have been convinced. We feel unhappy. We cannot leave the matter here. We shall continue to strive with you. Should you again feel prompted to go against the established rules, just think of your sorrowing friends."

Gandhiji: "I know. But what can I do when I feel impelled by duty? I can imagine circumstances when I may feel it my clear duty to go against the established rules. In such circumstances I cannot allow myself to be bound down by any commitment whatsoever."

His diary of the 16th March, 1947, at the end of the talks, contains the following:

Woke up today at the stroke of two.... Began to think of the meeting with X and Y. Did not like X's way of questioning and the accompanying smile on his face. Began to ponder over my *dharma*. This went on till 3.30 a.m.... Between 7.30 and 8.10 explained to X and Y my position.... According to my definition their ideas about Brahmacharya appear to me to be faulty and inadequate and need to be further extended along my lines.... By following the line that I have hitherto, I have advanced in my practice of Brahmacharya and hope to advance further still.... Felt greatly relieved in that I was able completely to clarify my position.

A prolonged correspondence followed. Why could he not wait till he had converted them or they him? Did he not believe in rebirth? Then why this impatient hurry to overstep the ramparts of ancient tradition? He, too, believed in rebirth, Gandhiji replied. Whatever remained unaccomplished in this birth would be accomplished in the next. But he also believed in putting forth one's best endeavour in this birth. To invoke the doctrine of rebirth as an excuse for laziness was false philosophy.

It was finally suggested to him that since neither side could convince the other, the whole question of formulating a new code of sex ethics and sex behaviour suited to modern conditions should be referred to a panel of names. Gandhiji pointed out the fallacy of the proposal. The proposers, with their inflexible views on the inviolability of the ancient orthodox tradition, were not prepared to contemplate any departure from the established practice in their case. He, on his part, with his inexorable search for truth was not prepared to be bound down by any conditions that might stand in the way of his quest. "On your own admission it (the new code) won't be binding on you," he wrote to one of them. "So far as I am concerned, I shall be bound only by my own conditions. So you and I shall remain where we are. What is the use of putting people to the bother of winnowing empty husk?"

Referring to the matter a few days later he observed that although he had failed to convert the dissentients to his viewpoint, he was more than ever convinced that his quest of Brahmacharya and the steps that he had taken in its pursuit was a unique venture — the biggest and last in his life.



Gandhiji's heart searching continued. In the course of a letter to Horace Alexander, referring to the decision taken at Haimchar as a "concession" to Thakkar Bapa's affection, he wrote: "What, however, is the subject of examination is my mental attitude, whether it is correct or whether . . . it is a remnant of my sexuality, however unconscious it might be. My whole mental outlook will be changed immediately I see this defect in me. Only then (it would mean that) the weakness was coeval with the time, when I took the vow of Brahmacharya which was probably in 1902. It may be that their (the dissenters') definition of Brahmacharya is different from mine." He amplified his meaning in a letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur:

You will have no difficulty in accepting at its face value my statement that no-one of our company knows the full value and implications of Brahmacharya, and that among those ignoramuses I am the least ignorant and the most experienced. . . . I have touched perhaps thousands upon thousands (of women). But my touch has never carried the meaning of lustfulness. . . . My touch has been for our mutual uplift. I would like those who have felt otherwise, if there are any, truly to testify against me. . . .

My meaning of Brahmacharya is this: "One who never has any lustful intention, who, by constant attendance upon God, has become . . . capable of lying naked with naked women, however beautiful they may be, without being in any manner whatsoever sexually excited. Such a person should be incapable of lying, incapable of intending doing harm to a single man or woman in the whole world, free from anger and malice and detached in the sense of the Bhagavad Gita. Such a person is a full Brahmachari. Brahmachari literally means a person who is making daily and steady progress towards God and whose every act is done in pursuance of that end and no other."<sup>43</sup>

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Badshah Khan (Abdul Ghaffar Khan) had come to Bihar to carry on Gandhiji's mission of peace. A devout Muslim and a model of personal purity, truthfulness and guileless sincerity, he had been following the controversy with close and painful interest.

"Mahatmaji, it amazes me, how crass very learned folk can be," he remarked indignantly one day. "They lack even a sense of proportion. Why cannot they see that Manu is just like a six months' babe to you. I have full faith in your purity. I might not in your place be able to do as you do as I have not that measure of self-confidence. But interminable discussions in which these good people are engaging you, seem to me to be utter nonsense, a sheer waste of time. I see nothing wrong whatever in Manu sleeping in the same bed with you. I cannot understand how a sensible man can fail to understand a simple thing like this. Don't they see, you have made the impossible possible in so many things? You have broken new ground in so many fields which was beyond their ken and conception? If someone were to argue that



because a thing is beyond his capacity, nobody should attempt it, I would say he is devoid of understanding, no matter how learned a scholar he is."

To Manu he said: "My heart goes out to you in the midst of this meaningless maelstrom. Have faith, it will be all well in the end. I envy the way you are serving Bapu; no wonder, many feel jealous. Do not mind what other people say. Follow the dictates of your conscience alone and Bapu's advice implicitly in every thing." Seeing her reminded him of Mehar Taj, his own (daughter), in the rugged North-West Frontier Province. With eyes beaming with affection, he proceeded: "I cannot describe to you my joy to see you at work. Remember that by serving him, you serve not only him but millions of God's poor, down-trodden creatures to whom he is their only hope."

A letter dated 11th March, 1947, from an English lady who had all along dissented from Gandhiji's views on Brahmacharya ran:

You must have received my previous letter.... In that you have seen that I was praying and praying for God's light, that I might reach the truth....

My former position was wholly illogical. I knew that you were rising ever higher and higher in spiritual strength, and... yet... I felt there was something wrong in this one matter. I could not see that if I was right in that, then all my other feelings about you must be wrong.

Today, after receiving your letter I went out and wandered in the forest for some two hours and by God's blessing, sense dawned on me. I have been a fool indeed, and what I most repent for is having been a trial and burden to you, not once, but many times. The only mitigating plea that I can offer is that I was always cent per cent. honest with myself and you....

Your patience in all my follies and humiliations has been amazing. I see in that patience now one of the purest expressions of non-violence.

## 5

Is celibacy or simple abstention from sex Brahmacharya? According to Gandhiji, Brahmacharya includes celibacy but celibacy is not the whole of Brahmacharya. Further, celibacy may or may not be Brahmacharya, much less is Brahmacharya repression, which breaks out in a variety of sadistic and masochistic abnormalities and other baffling complexes and psychopathic manifestations. When someone once suggested to Gandhiji the propagation of celibacy as a physical-culture measure to fit the Hindus for self-defence in communal conflicts, Gandhiji described it in the columns of *Young India* as "debasement of a lofty ideal"!

In other words, Brahmacharya is not dysfunction but regulation, balance and transmutation of certain functions. Modern researches into psychology and the mystery of Man the Unknown have taught us the



fundamental unity of psychic phenomena and their interrelation with bodily functions. The same truth is proclaimed in the Gita—all emotions and functions of the mind and body are united at the root, being Protean variations of the undifferentiated life force—the principle of activity. Anger and lust are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. Along with infatuation and error, they have a common origin; one leads to the other. Brahmacharya is a syndrome, an all-in complex, an end-result of a number of things, disciplines, observances. One cannot be intemperate in one's living, eating, drinking, work and sleep, uncontrolled in one's temper, likes and dislikes, callous, excessively greedy, dishonest and untruthful with oneself or in one's dealings with others and yet command that equipoise and balance of the delicate psychic and somosomatic mechanism upon which Brahmacharya even in the physical sense depends.

There is danger in reducing the ideal of Brahmacharya to externalism. It has led our society in its pharisaical self-righteousness to condone every variety of cruelty, meanness, selfishness and lust within wedlock, to enforce *suttee* and child-widowhood in the past in the name of feminine purity—which must be kept “unsoiled”—and to the “he-man's” double standards of morality in respect of the sexes. We condemn innocent victims of man's brutal lust as social outcasts when, as Gandhiji pointed out again and again, they deserve all our sympathy and care, like a case of “grievous physical hurt”.

Why do good people get agitated over this question of sex? Why can it not be discussed with a calm, dispassionate objectivity? Is it because we regard sex as “unclean” or at best a “fall from grace”? Is the married state necessarily on a lower level than celibacy? Gandhiji at one time thought that perhaps it was, but ended with the discovery for himself that it was not really so in the ideal. He gave to that ideal the name “married Brahmacharya”—the way of realising the Brahma through the married state. When an English disciple expressed her sense of shock at this (“Bapu, I feel as if you had put the spinning-wheel on the funeral pyre and cremated it.”) he told her it was her “mental laziness” which made her think so. The ideal of Brahmacharya called for a perennial alertness of the mind; it was not for the sluggish-minded or the spiritually inert.

Is the harshness of the anchorite or the ascetic a sign of true penance, or is it an indication of his distrust of himself—a repression symptom? “An impure thought,” said Gandhiji, “is a breach of Brahmacharya. So is anger.”<sup>44</sup> What is more, he pointed out, both lead to *identical results*—incontinence.

Again, is excessive concern for purity in the other sex, or in members of one's own, an indication of one's inner purity or is it a manifestation of what Meredith called the primitive barbarian in us with its unreclaimed lust? The answer is obvious. In Gandhiji's penance



there was room for neither. Brahmacharya with him meant sweetness, understanding, broad tolerance, strength. His was the attitude typified in the sage Narayana about whom the learned author of the *Bhagavata* says that he was altogether free from the forbidding harshness which is the usual defence of the struggling ascetics against the assaults of the residuary lust in them, but which is nevertheless a sign of immaturity, sometimes perversion:

क्षुत्तृट्रिकालगुणमास्तजैह्वयशैश्यान्स्मानपारजलधीन तृतीयं केचित् ।

क्रोधस्य यान्ति विफलस्य वशं पदे गोर्मज्जन्ति दुश्चरतश्च वृथोत्सृजन्ति ॥

“Some people who have mastered hunger and thirst; the three times—past, present and future; and the three qualities or attributes inseparable from relative existence, i.e., Satva, Rajas and Tamas; the vital airs—Prana, Apana, Udana, Samana and Vyana; the craving of the palate and even sex are over-powered by futile Anger, thus reducing to nothingness their hard penances like persons who having crossed boundless Oceans are drowned, as it were, in a puddle.”

The story goes that god Indra becoming jealous of the austerity of the sage Narayana and fearing lest by his power of penance he might dethrone him, sent Cupid with all the paraphernalia of Spring and heavenly damsels to thwart his penance. As the sage sat rapt in his meditation he felt the sap of Spring rising within him. Slowly he opened his eyes to see what the matter was. But, says the poet, instead of feeling angered or irritated, he only smiled a “kind, tolerant, compassionate smile”. Reassuring the heavenly damsels, who felt frightened at the consequences of their frivolous impertinence, he invited them to visit his Ashram. “Be not frightened, O heavenly damsels, accept my welcome, and do not deprive my Ashram of merit by returning without partaking of its hospitality.” In the Ashram he showed them many women, “plainly but beautifully dressed and possessed of wonderful charm”, engaged in various homely duties incidental to Ashram life. The heavenly visitors were so struck by the natural charm of virtuous domestic life that they were moved to envy and emulation and on the sage’s invitation, took one of them to Indra’s heaven to serve as their model of heavenly beauty in future!

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There are two well-known approaches to life—that of negation or elimination and that of affirmation or synthesis. Gandhiji’s critics represented the former, Gandhiji was an embodiment of the latter.

Gandhiji was singularly free from any trace of morbid self-mortification. He regarded unruffled serenity and cheerfulness as the natural state of one who is in tune with the infinite. “When observance of Brahmacharya becomes natural to one . . . a person should be free from anger and kindred passions. The so-called Brahmacharis that one generally comes across, behave as if their one occupation in life was the



display of bad temper.”<sup>45</sup> He had nerves extremely sensitive to pain. But the iron will in him transmuted his aesthetic sensitiveness and deep compassion for the weak and the suffering into a relentless self-discipline and self-denial which was often mistaken for self-mortification and self-suppression by casual and superficial observers, but was as different from either as chalk is from cheese.

People sometimes talked thoughtlessly of his “asceticism”. Whatever it was, it was not devoid of “spiritual gaiety” which all who came into close contact with him found to be irresistibly infectious. He carried with him everywhere not only the power but also the sweet graces of his basic disciplines. His asceticism never gave him a morbid dread of his fellow creatures but liberated him into the largest possible circle of pure and noble relationships. “I hope you have not missed the woman in me,” he once wrote to Sarojini Naidu. This is not a trait associated with the traditional picture of a monk but, as a contemporary has aptly reminded us, it was a striking characteristic of St. Francis of Assisi — “his great faith, great fortitude, great devotion, great patience, great tenderness and great sympathy.”<sup>46</sup> “Most women love men for such attributes as are usually considered masculine,” observed Mrs. Polak. “Yet Mahatma Gandhi has been given the love of many women for his womanliness; for all those qualities that are associated with women. . . . Women would sense that in him they had found a fellow-traveller, one who had passed ahead along the road they, too, were travelling, and could give him an affection deep, pure and untouched by any play of sex-emotion. Women of all kinds have turned to him in perplexity and trouble, and no problem of their lives but could be discussed with absolute frankness, if they desired to do so. They could be sure that some light would be thrown upon their difficulties and the path made to look not too arduous to travel.”<sup>47</sup>

“I associate him,” remarked Verrier Elwin, the well-known anthropologist, referring to this trait of Gandhiji’s character, “with growing flowers, fresh fruit, the wide and open river, the prayer before the morning star has risen, the walk in the unsullied air of dawn.”<sup>48</sup>

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Gandhiji was not the only teacher in the world’s history to puzzle and perplex the upholders of orthodox tradition. Was not Jesus also criticised for mixing with “publicans and sinners” and for telling a woman who had sinned that to her much was forgiven because she had loved much?

It is easy to distort or parody a delicate issue like this. But one can do so only at one’s cost — by shutting oneself from the understanding of a great ideal.

By absorption more and more in the outer world of senses, man has been able to gain mastery over the physical world. But in the process he has lost touch with the wells of intuitive knowledge within



himself. His understanding of himself has not kept pace with his understanding of the outer world. His physics has not taught him how to regulate his own self. In the result the very power which he has gained over his physical environment today threatens to turn against him and overwhelm him. Society must find an answer to this double challenge of amoral force and a religion and morality that have lost their sanctions that stares it in the face, or perish.

Our problem today, observes Gerald Heard, is of search not for new ends or lofty goals, but for means, "the power to use a force which does not frustrate itself"<sup>49</sup>; something that will restore to religion and morality the sanction they have lost. Can we find spiritual powers equal to our unbalanced physical powers, the finding of which is a matter of life and death for civilisation? he asks and answers: "We have today a society which must capsize unless our psychic knowledge can equal our physics. This . . . can only be done by a specific training whereby the latent energy for this creative task and act, an energy which lurks inside us and manifests itself in pain and lust, individual neurosis and mass neurosis, be made to express itself in advanced and purely psychological activities. . . . By this advance in psychological power we may at last achieve a non-violent sanction for all human relationships and new approach in our relationships with animal life and a new insight into the inanimate."<sup>50</sup>

Man owes his primacy in nature, it has been observed, to the fact that he alone seems to have an immense store of still unused, undifferentiated primal energy. The sex harmonic charge with which man is endowed is, according to Gerald Heard, ten times greater than that of a bull. This unstaunched primal energy—far in excess of our procreative requirements—is an evolutionary force waiting to be transformed into a new faculty. Dr. W. Grey Walter, the well-known neurologist, in his treatise, *The Living Brain*, has thrown interesting light on the physiological basis of the evolution of higher faculties. His thesis is that it was the freeing of the upper brain from the menial tasks of the body by the relegation of those functions to the lower brain by development of "automatic system of stabilisation for the vital functions of the organism"—homeostasis—that finally gave *homo sapiens* his lordship of the earth; and it is only when the human brain attains complete freedom from the incessant demands of the senses that the possibility of the highest development of man, of which the seers and mystics have dreamed and which it is his destiny to attain, will be realised.

When this store of energy is transmuted into a higher form of creative activity man transcends sex consciousness. In the case of the modern man this reserve is dissipated in aimless sexuality, not only through physical abuse but also through "psychic haemorrhage" helped by "entertainment industry", which seems to be largely devised "with the express purpose of keeping his veins



open". This "psychic bleeding" of the modern man, induced by pornography, voyeurism, erotic art, obscene advertising etc., Dr. Grey Walter warns, "is evolution in the reverse gear and fraught with the most far reaching consequences to the human race". Referring to the incessant sexuality of our times, he says: "Many civilised peoples have sought to endow sex with a ritual. This has at least an effect of providing a pattern of sex behaviour for the brain. Physiologically considered, some special art of discipline of this kind would be preferable to the mild but unceasing stimulus of the popular arts of today, excitatory without being formative. Heaven only knows what mutations this titillation may in time promote neither so lordly as those of the amphibia nor so decorative as those of the plants. Puritan and sensualist agree that the pleasures of touch, unguided by any art of their own, are nasty, brutish and short".<sup>51</sup>

The *sthitaprajna* ideal, he further shows, has a deep significance in terms of the highest evolution of man. Quoting the testimony of that noted savant, Sir Joseph Bancroft, in this connection he writes:

How often have I watched the ripples on the surface of a still lake made by a passing boat, noted their regularity and admired the patterns formed when two such ripple-systems meet . . . but the lake must be perfectly calm. . . . To look for high intellectual development in a milieu whose properties have not become stabilised, is to seek . . . ripple-patterns on the surface of the stormy Atlantic.<sup>52</sup>

He recognises in the "perfect mechanical calm" which this allows the brain the physiological basis of "all the perfectionist faiths . . . nirvana, the abstraction of the Yogi, the peace that passeth understanding, the derided 'happiness that lies within'; it is a state of grace in which disorder and disease are mechanical slips and errors".<sup>53</sup>

To develop the faculty of high attention needed to give man a better understanding of himself and a perception of the higher law, which is its own sanction, man has at the very least to become passionless. In the words of Gerald Heard, "The highly developed intellectual type tends to find when in complete intellectual absorption that he becomes indifferent to sex, and the practice of contemplation makes that freedom perpetual."<sup>54</sup> It was in pursuit of this quest that Gandhiji's researches in Brahmacharya were conceived and conducted. He never underrated the risk which this involved. But the risk may not be shirked. The path of the Lord, as he again and again pointed out, is not for the spiritually timid. To quote Gerald Heard once again, "Man has transmuted the atom. . . . He must now transmute himself. What was urgent has now become desperate. . . . The other side (the temporal) has been prepared to pay and having paid has been given what it asked — power. The religious side must be prepared to pay, and if it will pay, it will be given what it needs — and the world is dying for — vision"<sup>55</sup>



that leads to power about which it was said of old that “‘time would fail to tell’ what that power can do when it is really pure.”<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, the danger of mechanical imitation without adequate preparation and discipline cannot be overemphasised. As the learned author of the *Bhagavata* puts it:

धर्मव्यतिक्रमो दृष्ट ईश्वराणां च साहसम् ।  
 तेजीयसां न दोषाय बह्वेः सर्वभुजो यथा ॥  
 नतत्समाचरेज्जातु मनसापि ह्यनीश्वरः ।  
 विनश्यत्याचरन् मौढ्याद् यथाऽरुद्रोऽब्धिजं विषम् ॥  
 ईश्वराणां वचः सत्यं तथैवाचरितं क्वचित् ।  
 तेषां यत्स्ववचोयुक्तं बुद्धिमांस्तत्समाचरेत् ॥

“Masters (those possessed of extraordinary power of self-control) are sometimes seen courageously to transgress the prescribed rules of conduct. This is not a blemish in those with *tejas* or radiance, even as the all-devouring fire is not affected (by what it consumes). He who is lacking in such control should not even think of imitating such conduct, for it can only bring destruction to him like swallowing poison in imitation of Shiva. The teachings of the great hold true for all, not always their actions. So, a wise person should imitate only such conduct of the Masters as conforms to their precepts.”

## 6

In February, 1947, when the controversy was at its height, two of Gandhiji's colleagues, who had temporarily taken upon them the burden of editing *Harijan* during his mission in Noakhali, tendered their resignation as a token of protest and non-cooperation. Gandhiji told them that it was a wrong decision on their part but if they could not be persuaded to reconsider it, he was prepared to take charge of the weeklies if the trustees so wished. But the trustees, it seems, had some mental reservations. They had not published portions of his prayer addresses bearing on the issue of Brahmacharya which he had sent from Noakhali for publication in the *Harijan* weeklies. What was the good of his conducting the paper, if he could not write as he felt? “I fully realise *Harijan* does not belong to me,” he wrote to one of the trustees. “It really belongs to you who are conducting it with such diligence. Whatever authority I exercise is moral.”<sup>57</sup> The trustees protested that they had no intention to fetter his discretion. He yielded to their wishes though not without a pang. “There is no restriction as such, but I can see that all desire it. You regard me as your elder. So what else can you say? . . . But if an occasion should arise which requires me not to yield to the wishes of all of you, I shall see.”<sup>58</sup>



On the 25th May, 1947, Gandhiji arrived from Patna in the sweltering heat of Delhi in response to Pandit Nehru's call to discuss Mountbatten's partition plan and resumed writing in *Harijan* which he had deliberately suspended for over six months as a part of his renunciation when he broke up his camp in Noakhali for the lone sojourn. The practice, too, which as a concession to Thakkar Bapa he had temporarily suspended while he was in Bihar, was, after due notice to his dissenting colleagues, resumed when he settled down at Delhi and was continued right till the end. Also continued the relentless self-examination and self-scrutiny. In a series of remarkable articles in *Harijan*, he began to clarify his final views on "things of eternal value". The first article, dated 2nd June, 1947, ran:

The world seems to be running after things of transitory value. It has no time for the other. And yet, when one thinks a little deeper, it becomes clear that it is the things eternal that count in the end....One such is Brahmacharya.

What is Brahmacharya? It is the way of life which leads us to Brahma — God. It includes full control over the process of reproduction. The control must be in thought, word and deed. If the thought is not under control, the other two have no value....For one whose thought is under control, the other is mere child's play.<sup>59</sup>

The next question is: What is God? If man knew the answer it would enable him to know the path that leads to Him.

God is not a person.... God is the force. He is the essence of life. He is pure and undefiled consciousness. He is eternal. And yet, strangely enough, all are not able to derive either benefit from or shelter in the all-pervading living presence.

Electricity is a powerful force. Not all can benefit from it. It can only be produced by following certain laws. It is a lifeless force. Man can utilise it if he labours hard enough to acquire the knowledge of its laws.

The living force which we call God can similarly be found if we know and follow His law leading to the discovery of Him in us.... The law, in one word, may be termed Brahmacharya.<sup>60</sup>

Patanjali has described five disciplines. It is not possible to isolate any one of these and practise it. It may be posited in the case of Truth, because it really includes the other four. And for this age the five have been expanded into eleven. They are non-violence, truth, non-stealing, Brahmacharya, non-possession, bread-labour, control of the palate, fearlessness, equal regard for all religions, Swadeshi and removal of untouchability. All these can be derived from Truth.

There seems to be a popular belief amongst us that breach of truth or non-violence is pardonable. Non-stealing and non-possession are rarely mentioned; we hardly recognise the necessity of observing them. But a fancied breach of Brahmacharya excites wrath and worse. There must be something



seriously wrong with a society in which values are exaggerated and underestimated.

Moreover, to use the word Brahmacharya in a narrow sense is to detract from its value. Such detraction increases the difficulty of proper observance. When it is isolated even the elementary observance becomes difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, it is essential that all the disciplines should be taken as one. This enables one to realise the full meaning and significance of Brahmacharya.<sup>61</sup>

He then proceeded to work out some of the corollaries of this grand principle. In the case of a person who has attained the ideal, the discarding of the nine-fold wall is the natural result, it being no longer necessary. But in the case of one who aspires to attain that ideal, the discarding is a means, and may not be shirked even though it may involve some risk.

It is true that he who has attained perfect Brahmacharya does not stand in need of protecting walls. But the aspirant undoubtedly needs them, even as a young mango plant has need of a strong fence round it. A child goes from its mother's lap to the cradle and from cradle to the push-cart — till he becomes a man who has learnt to walk without aid. To cling to the aid when it is needless is surely harmful.

It appears to me that even the *true aspirant does not need the above-mentioned restraints*. Brahmacharya is not a virtue that can be cultivated by outward restraints. He who runs away from a necessary contact with a woman does not understand the full meaning of Brahmacharya. However attractive a woman may be, her attraction will produce no effect on the man without the urge....

The true Brahmachari will shun false restraints. *He must create his own fences according to his limitations, breaking them down when he feels that they are unnecessary*. The first thing is to know what true Brahmacharya is, then to realise its value, and lastly to try to cultivate this priceless virtue. I hold that true service of the country demands this observance.<sup>62</sup> (Italics mine).

As against prescriptive restraints, "the straight way to cultivate Brahmacharya is Ramanama" which is another way of saying that the conquest of self is possible only through God's grace. Intellect can take one very far and sincere striving is an inevitable corollary of honest prayer, but in the hour of real trial the grace of God alone saves.

I can say with conviction that the orthodox aids to Brahmacharya pale into insignificance before Ramanama, when this name is enthroned in the heart.... Thus, the eleven rules of conduct are the means to enable us to reach God. Of the eleven rules Truth is the means and God called Rama is the end. Is it not equally true that Ramanama is the means and Truth is the end?<sup>63</sup>

A devotee of Rama may be said to be the same as the steadfast one (*sthita-prajna*) of the Gita.... Such a man will take God's name with every breath. His Rama will be awake even whilst the body is asleep. Rama will always be



with him in whatever he does. The real death for such a devoted man will be the loss of this sacred companionship.

As an aid to keeping his Rama with him, he will take what the five elements have to give him. That is to say he will employ the simplest and easiest way of deriving all the benefit he can from earth, air, water, sunlight and ether. This aid is not complementary to Ramanama. Ramanama does not in fact require any aid. But to claim belief in Ramanama and at the same time to run to doctors do not go hand in hand.

A friend versed in religious lore who read my remarks on Ramanama some time ago wrote to say that Ramanama is an alchemy such as can transform the body. The conservation of vital energy has been likened to accumulated wealth, but it is in the power of Ramanama alone to make it a running stream of ever-increasing spiritual strength ultimately making a fall impossible.<sup>64</sup>

A discussion followed. Wrote a perplexed correspondent: "Something within me tells me that every touch (of a woman), be it ever so superficial, is bound to lead to the eruption of animal passion. . . . In my opinion the flaw of mere touch drags down inside a month, even a week, one who is not endowed with extra purity."

"There is only one way for such young people," replied Gandhiji. "They have to avoid all contact of the opposite sex. The checks and restraints described in our books were the results of experiences gained during those times. They were no doubt necessary for the writers and their readers. Today every aspirant has to pick out from them the necessary items and add new ones which experience may make necessary. If we draw a circle round the goal to be reached, we shall find many ways leading to the goal, each one according to his needs. An aspirant who does not know his own mind will certainly fail if he blindly copies another."<sup>65</sup> He concluded:

Having said so much by way of caution, I must add that . . . those whom I have in mind have their God enthroned in their hearts. They are neither self-deceived nor would they deceive others. To them their sisters and mothers are ever thus and for them all women are in the place of sisters and mothers. It never occurs to them that it is fraught with danger. They see in all women the same God they see in themselves. It will betray lack of humility to say that such specimens do not exist because we have not come across them. Lack of belief in the possibility would also amount to lowering the standard of Brahmacharya. There is as much error in saying that there is no God because we have not seen Him face to face or because we have not met men who have had that experience, as there is in rejecting the possibilities of Brahmacharya because our own evidence is to the contrary.

Lastly came the question of the conservation of social good. "I entirely agree with you," wrote another correspondent, referring to "identical" views which he had expressed in a letter to him eleven years



ago though he had "lacked the courage" to act up to them. "Nevertheless . . . I often say to myself, 'Why enter the muck-hole at all?' . . . It seems to me that it is wisdom for those who have reached a higher state to act in accordance with the capacity of those many who belong to a lower state to avoid the risk of the lower state people resorting to thoughtless imitation. I admit however . . . that if there was nobody to demonstrate the feasibility of the higher state, society would never develop faith in that state. Therefore, someone has got to demonstrate the feasibility of reaching the higher state. I seem to reach the conclusion that every great man has got to model his behaviour after due appreciation of the *pros* and *cons*." To this Gandhiji replied:

Everyone should learn how to measure his own weakness. He who knowing his weakness imitates the strong is bound to fall. Hence have I contended that everyone should construct his own restraints.

I can only detect ignorance in likening woman to a muck-pot. The very thought is insulting to both man and woman. May not her son sit side by side with his mother or the man share the same bench in a train with his sister? He who suffers excitement through such juxtaposition is surely an object of pity.<sup>66</sup>

The danger of blind imitation is surely to be considered and guarded against. But the danger of stagnation is not less. The letter killeth.

Although I believe that for the sake of social good one should abandon many things, I feel that there is room for wise discretion even in the observance of such restraints. . . . Theoretically speaking there is nothing harmful in both the sexes going about in utter nakedness. It is said that in their state of innocence Adam and Eve had not even a fig leaf to cover their nakedness. But immediately they became aware of their nakedness, they began to cover themselves and were hurled from paradise. Are we not in that inherited fallen state? If we were to forget that, we would surely harm ourselves. I consider this an instance of observing prohibition for the sake of social good.

Contrariwise, for the very sake of society it was just and proper to give up untouchability although it was fashionable among people of accepted merit. Marriage of nine-year-old girls used to be defended on the ground of social good. So was prohibition against crossing the seas. Such instances can be multiplied. Every custom has to be examined on its merits.

Restraints must not be such as to perpetuate sex-consciousness. In most of our daily transactions such consciousness should be absent. The only occasion when it is called for, so far as I am aware, is when one feels sexually disturbed. If the consciousness afflicted us the whole day long, we should be considered to have a corrupt mind and such a mind is not conducive to social welfare.<sup>67</sup>

That ended the controversy so far as he was concerned. Thereafter he ceased to try to convince by argument but relied more and more on the power of Ramanama with all its implications. That meant, among other things, uttermost detachment — indifference to praise and blame.



The whirligig of time did the rest. Two of his colleagues, who had been the sincerest as also the most uncompromising in their opposition and had carried their dissent even to the point of resigning from the editorship of his *Harijan* weeklies, realised, after he was gone and when they themselves were preparing to join him, that they had grievously misjudged him. One of them, Narhari Parikh, wrote to me that he felt that he had done Gandhiji grave injustice. His colleague, Kishorlal G. Mashruwala, he added, had seen his mistake even earlier.

In a booklet on health which Gandhiji revised and enlarged during his detention in Poona in 1943, he has set down the physical characteristics of one in whom sex energy has been sublimated as follows: "He . . . will find that he requires very little food to keep his body in a fit condition. And yet he will be as capable as any of undertaking physical labour. Mental exertion will not tire him easily nor will he show the ordinary signs of old age. Just as a ripe fruit or an old leaf falls off naturally, so will such a Brahmachari when his time comes pass away with all his faculties intact. Although with the passage of time the effects of the natural wear and tear must be manifest in his body, his intellect instead of showing signs of decay should show progressive clarity."<sup>68</sup> More than that, it should show itself in that detachment which comes to one who has entirely surrendered himself to the Unseen Power and lives only to do His will. "My austerities, fastings and prayers are . . . of no value if I rely upon them for reforming me. But they have an inestimable value if they represent . . . the yearnings of a soul striving to lay his weary head on the lap of his Maker."<sup>69</sup>

On that touch-stone he began to test himself. "In spite of the fact that some of my old and tried Ashram colleagues have parted company with me," he remarked one day, "I am experiencing an equanimity, steadiness and firmness of purpose that I never did before. It fills me with an ineffable peace and joy. It shows that I am coming nearer and nearer to my ideal of *sthitaprajna*." In corroboration of this he mentioned his phenomenal mastery over sleep, his perennial freshness and alertness of mind, and his capacity for physical endurance and sustained mental concentration which amazed everybody — including himself.

\* \* \*

To attain sublimation, transmutation of libido into psychic energy, has been the endeavour of men through the ages. The possibility of such transmutation is generally admitted by modern science but the actual process by which it is accomplished is still not fully understood. "It is evident", for instance, writes Freud, "that mental application or concentration of attention on an intellectual accomplishment will result . . . in simultaneous sexual excitement". From this he goes on to argue that all the connecting paths leading from other functions of sexuality "must also be passable in the *reverse*



*direction*”, and since we know that concentration of attention may produce sexual excitement, “*it is quite natural to assume that acting on the same path, but in reverse direction, the state of sexual excitement may be able to influence the availability of voluntary attention*”.

But while maintaining that “it must be through these paths that the attraction of the sexual motive powers to other than sexual aims, the sublimation of sexuality, is accomplished”, he concludes with the admission that “very little is definitely known concerning the paths beyond the fact that they exist and that they are probably passable in both directions”.<sup>70</sup>

All, therefore, that with our imperfect knowledge of psycho-physiology and working of the endocrine system in man can be said with certainty is, that it does take place and that hardly anything of significance occurs in the organism that is unrelated to it. In the words of Freud, “It is possible that nothing of any considerable significance occurs in the organism that does not also contribute its components to the excitement of the sexual instinct.” The achievement of sublimation, therefore, involves an understanding and organisation of the whole organism.

The central meaning and significance of the testimony of Gandhiji’s striving for Brahmacharya would seem to be this that, unlike some of the paroxysmal and mortificatory techniques for the attainment of sublimation, for which success has been claimed,<sup>71</sup> the practice of Ramanama can serve like a “moderator element” in a nuclear reactor to convert the high explosive potential into an inexhaustible, steady current of controlled energy. By deep absorption in and surrender to the Power for which that Name stands, and making the entire current of one’s being in keeping with and contributory to that end, the entire sum of consciousness of the aspirant is gathered up and drawn, as Romain Rolland puts it, into “some unknown and usually ignored cortical centre . . . some unknown psychic pineal gland . . . wherein all organic functions and all psychic forces meet”<sup>72</sup>—there to be transmuted by the identification of the “seer with the thing seen”, into an experience of the various qualities or attributes by which He in His fragmentary aspect is known and which are summed up in that Name (see page 166). In Romain Rolland’s words, “He will become most like Him who ‘have participated in it (the practice of His qualities) in many forms’ ”.<sup>73</sup> Finally, when the practice of all those qualities in their totality has become one’s second nature, He is experienced as *shunyata*, or “the egoless state” in which all qualities meet “in an amalgam of anonymity” like the various colours of the spectrum in a shaft of pure sunlight, and which in human relationships manifests itself as pure compassion, that being its “primary reflex” on the emotional plane. This state of *shunyata*, egolessness, or pure compassion is said to be the source of the intensest activity known, not only individual but even cosmic activity—in fact all cosmic activity. Laotse



profoundly observed, "A wheel is made up of thirty perceptible spokes but it is because of the central non-perceptible void of the nave (the dead-centre) that it turns".<sup>74</sup> Astronomers tell us that it is "the gulfs of cosmic emptiness" in the central void of space which are "the homes of the various universes".<sup>75</sup> In the same way, Gandhiji has affirmed: "If we shatter the chains of egotism and melt into the ocean of humanity we . . . become one with God. . . . God is continuously in action. . . . As soon as we become one with the ocean in the shape of God, there is no more rest for us, nor indeed do we need rest any longer. . . . This restlessness constitutes true rest. This never-ceasing agitation holds the key to peace ineffable. This supreme state . . . is difficult to describe, but not beyond the bounds of human experience."<sup>76</sup>

As his self-surrender deepened and even the will to live apart from Him neared the vanishing point, the potency of his non-violence increased in proportion and he became filled more and more with that infinite and all-pervading power which is God or Truth and which manifests itself in human relationships as Ahimsa or Love. His fast at Calcutta in August, 1947, when a "One Man Boundary Force", to use Lord Mountbatten's phrase, achieved what "fifty thousand soldiers" in the Punjab could not, and his last fast at Delhi were the culmination of that power which may yet prove to be as powerful as the modern nuclear physicist's atomic chain-reaction.



PART THREE  
CALL TO REPENTANCE







## CHAPTER XII

### ‘THE GREATER THE SINNER THE GREATER THE SAINT’

#### 1

WHILE THE stalemate in Noakhali thus continued, pressure on Gandhiji to go to Bihar went on increasing. On the 6th February, 1947, he wrote to Pandit Nehru: “Very great pressure is being put upon me to go to Bihar because they all say that things are not properly represented to me on behalf of the Bihar Government. I am watching.”

There was not a day but brought a sheaf of letters — angry letters, threatening letters, sometimes even abusive letters — mostly from the Muslim Leaguers, wanting to know why Gandhiji did not go to Bihar. He carefully examined each one of them for any grain of truth that there might be in it and had all allegations checked up by the Bihar Government and others till they were either substantiated or proved to be incorrect. A letter from the President of the District Muslim League, Monghyr (Bihar), was characteristic: “The atrocities committed by the Hindus in Bihar have no parallel in history. . . . But not a word of sympathy for the Muslim sufferers of this Province, and not a word of rebuke and reproach for the criminals . . . could come from your mouth. Still you ask the Muslims to have confidence in the nationalism advocated by you, in the ‘National’ Congress supported by you and ‘National’ leaders patronised by you. . . . I would request you, therefore, to come to Bihar at your earliest if you really want to serve humanity.”<sup>1</sup> To this Gandhiji replied:

Your letter . . . is . . . hysterical. . . . I would like you to tell me how I can serve the Muslims better by going to Bihar. Whilst I do not endorse your remark that the atrocities committed by the Hindus in Bihar have no parallel in history, I am free to admit that they were in magnitude much greater than in Noakhali. . . . I would urge you, as President of the Monghyr District Muslim League, to confine yourself to proved facts which, I am sorry to say, you have not done <sup>2</sup>.

An advocate from Aligarh was even more downright. “As the leader of the aggressive community,” he wrote, Gandhiji ought to have toured those places where “appalling and horrible atrocities have been committed by your community”. After telling him that his “shed fear slogans” and his advice to “caste Hindus ‘to kill and be killed’ ” had been responsible for “the Great Calcutta Killing . . . (and) the Bihar massacre” he went on to say: “If you are sincere in your professions for Hindu-



Muslim unity you must tour those areas where your community is in an aggressive role.”<sup>3</sup> Gandhiji wrote back:

You belong to a great university and hold the degree of M.A. But I am sorry to have to tell you that your letter is wholly unbalanced. You will let me serve Hindus, Muslims and others in the best manner I know. If I fail, I shall feel sorry. But I cannot change my programme according to an opinion which does not appeal to my reason.... I refuse to draw the distinction between aggressive and non-aggressive communities.... Religion is my personal concern. It ought not to interfere with my duty as a citizen of India.<sup>4</sup>

A barrister from Patna wrote that it was “very surprising indeed” that Gandhiji was “wasting” his time in Noakhali: “The deputation (on behalf of Bihar Government) . . . which went to you recently gave you all wrong information, and I am surprised that Mr. Houlton, a European, (Relief Commissioner, Bihar) is also a party to it! The Bihar tragedy is due entirely to the neglect of the Ministry. . . . You should come . . . and pass strong remarks on the behaviour of your Congress Ministry.” In a post-script the correspondent added: “The whole trouble is that you pleaded and fought for securing self-rule for your community which is wholly incapable and does not know how Government is carried on.”<sup>5</sup>

Ignoring the acerbity, Gandhiji got the Bihar Government to send him a detailed reply running into two and a half typed foolscap sheets and exhaustively dealing with all the points raised in the letter. To his irate correspondent he wrote:

Are you not my old tireless correspondent to whom I could carry no conviction? You have started with an emphatic statement of opinion without caring to inquire how I am passing my time and telling me on what grounds you have come to a conclusion. You have condemned me guilty without even hearing me, the accused. You have also laid down the law that Bihar needs my presence more urgently than Noakhali. Since I am in a position to know more fully than any other person whether I am wasting my time in Noakhali or not, it is fair for me to assume that your conclusion about Bihar is as erroneous as about Noakhali.

The second paragraph of your letter is as disappointing as the first. You could have no knowledge whatsoever of the information that (the Bihar deputation) . . . could have given me and yet you pronounce judgment and say that (they) . . . gave me “all wrong information” and that Mr. Houlton was party to it.... So far as I am aware, an impartial commission of inquiry is to be held and if it is, I think it is up to you and me to suspend our judgment.<sup>6</sup>

Another letter from the same correspondent ended with the suggestion: “To save Bihar from further calamity I hope you will have the courage to declare that the Bihar Ministry should be dismissed, Section 93 be applied, and the present Governor may also be changed with this



corrupt Ministry.”<sup>7</sup> It brought from Gandhiji the following: “I am surprised at your asking me to condemn the Bihar Ministry unheard. I am ashamed that at this time of day you should think of the application of Section 93. There are many honourable ways of exposing the corruption no matter where it exists. The application of Section 93 is not among them.”<sup>8</sup>

A frivolous reference by Shaheed Suhrawardy to Gandhiji’s “inner voice” hurt Gandhiji. He gently suggested to Shaheed that even he (the Shaheed) had it, if he would only care to listen to it: “I have seen in the newspapers a statement attributed to you which reads like a jibe at me. I would not expect that from you. Therefore I give you the credit of believing that I have the inner voice to which I listen. My belief is that all mankind has it. But the outside din and noise have practically deadened it for the vast majority of people. When my voice speaks I shall find myself in Bihar without any further prompting.”<sup>9</sup>

While thus refusing to allow himself to be influenced by anger or ridicule, Gandhiji continued his effort to get at the truth. He encouraged Col. Niranjana Singh Gill of the Indian National Army to proceed to Bihar and report. Though Col. Gill’s report exploded many a myth propagated by the Muslim League, it was damaging enough to the Bihar Government. It set Gandhiji thinking. In a letter to Dr. Syed Mahmud, the Bihar Minister, he wrote: “I cannot decide between Muslim League report and what is reported to me from other sources as to where lies the truth. I want you to write to me as to how far the League report is true.”<sup>10</sup> Dr. Mahmud kept silent. His continued silence in spite of repeated reminders from Gandhiji was intriguing. It made Gandhiji impatient to get at the truth.

## 2

Maulvi Fazlul Huq, the ex-Premier of Bengal, now entered upon the scene. A chip of the same block as the then Bengal Premier so far as freedom from scruples and elasticity of conscience were concerned, he had a score to settle with his political rival. Since his expulsion from the Muslim League by Jinnah for insubordination and defiance of his authority, there had been no love lost between the two. But after the “Direct Action” in Calcutta in August, 1946, during which a Muslim mob was said to have threatened to apply “Direct Action” to him for his “anti-League” and “fifth-columnist” activities, he had made discretion the better part of valour and sought readmission to the fold of the “faithful”. He was forgiven and readmitted. Thereafter he had been anxious to regain his lost popularity and position in the Muslim League organisation.

Gandhiji’s Noakhali peace mission had been an eyesore to the Muslim League High Command. Shaheed Suhrawardy’s willy-nilly



association with it and the unpopular measures which his Government had been forced to take after the Noakhali disturbances provided an ideal target for attack. Here was a chance to kill two birds with one stone. In a public speech at Barisal, Maulvi Fazlul Huq demanded that as a non-Muslim Gandhiji should not "preach" the teachings of Islam. With his characteristic recklessness he then proceeded to narrate a cock-and-bull story of how on Gandhiji's return from South Africa he had asked Gandhiji to embrace Islam, whereupon Gandhiji had confided to him that he was in fact a Muslim at heart. But when the Maulvi Saheb asked him to proclaim it publicly, Gandhiji refused!

Instead of being provoked, Gandhiji gave a reasoned reply to the first while appealing to the Maulvi Saheb "for the sake of his own reputation" to issue a disclaimer in regard to the second part of his speech. The whole speech was a cheap electioneering stunt — all the more unfortunate as coming from a person who was aspiring for the Presidentship of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League. Maulvi Fazlul Huq's election manifesto for the Presidentship contained, among other things, the following: "If I am elected to this post, I shall demand (1) the immediate removal of Gandhiji from Noakhali for Bihar, and (2) removal of the military at an early date from Noakhali and Tipperah." In the course of the same speech, the Maulvi Saheb had gone on to denounce Shaheed Suhrawardy's Government for allowing Gandhiji and other "outsiders" to come and work in Noakhali. He wondered how the Muslims of Noakhali and Tipperah had tolerated Gandhiji's presence so long. Rising to a peroration, he declared that if Gandhiji had gone to his home-district of Barisal, he would have driven him and his goat into the *khal*! He followed it up by a wire asking for an interview with Gandhiji in order to have a "heart-to-heart" talk with him! The meeting came off after several delays on the 27th February at Haimchar.

Gandhiji was not in his room when the ex-Premier walked in with four others, dressed in pyjamas and coat, his fez thrown back at an angle, and a garland of faded flowers around his neck announcing a popular hero's reception which evidently his admirers had given him. The day was warm. Panting and perspiring the Maulvi Saheb deposited his frame "pursy and short of breath" on Gandhiji's wooden sofa and began to fan himself. Presently Gandhiji came in.

"Oh, don't stand up. You were the Chief Minister when I met you last!" Gandhiji remarked as the Maulvi Saheb got up and shook hands with him. After the usual exchange of courtesies the Maulvi Saheb said: "I shall be frank with you. It is no use saying one thing and having something else up your sleeve." Gandhiji nodded complete agreement.

The Maulvi Saheb began: Gandhiji had not gone to Bihar; his place was in Bihar rather than in Noakhali; Noakhali Muslims, far from being aggressors, were the victims of police repression. Hindu



police officers were harassing innocent Muslims and implicating them in false cases—they should be withdrawn; Muslims were not criminals, abductors of women etc.; Islam never taught that.

Gandhiji again agreed so far as the teachings of Islam in the abstract were concerned. The Maulvi Saheb proceeded: "Very few understand Islam. They call it the religion of the sword. The minorities in the Muslim State were the special responsibility of the majority. The non-Muslims were *zimmi*s." The Maulvi Saheb's last point was that far from the Hindus having cause to be afraid of the Muslim majority in Noakhali, it was the latter, in fact, who were afraid of Hindu domination! The Hindus should shed their fear and accept Pakistan. His Majesty's Government's statement of 20th February, 1947, would only bring civil-war to India.

When he had finished, at a friendly gesture, Gandhiji in a tone of light banter asked, referring to the Maulvi Saheb's gibe a few days back: "So, if I come to Barisal, there is only the *khal* for me, is it not?"

"No, no, Mahatmaji, you are always welcome. That was only a joke. I never can let go a joke—even at the expense of my father. That is my nature!" The Maulvi Saheb replied looking down, but with a sly smile playing upon his lips.

Taking up Maulvi Saheb's last point first, Gandhiji said that he had always asked Jinnah to convince him of the meaning and implications of Pakistan. His formula was before the Muslim League leader and the country and so far as he was concerned the offer still stood. As regards withdrawal of criminal cases, it rested with the Bengal Government. "Regarding Bihar", he continued, "I may shortly go there." "But it will not be to oblige you," he added so as not to give the Maulvi Saheb a chance to exploit his (Gandhiji's) forthcoming visit to Bihar in his political feud with Shaheed. He was awaiting Dr. Mahmud's reply, he told the Maulvi Saheb, but if the latter could assure him that the majority community in Noakhali would stand guarantee for the safety and security of the minority community, he would feel free to leave Bengal immediately. Could he give that assurance?

To this the Maulvi Saheb gave no straight reply. Instead, he began to talk about a coalition Government in Bengal as the only remedy for Bengal's ills!

At this point one of Fazlul Huq's companions broke in: "I was a worker in the Khilafat movement; you were the first leader who taught me politics."

"If you had taken your politics of me, you would have given a much better account of yourself," Gandhiji replied.

Undeterred, the gentleman proceeded: "The other day, while coming here you passed near my house. But I did not come out to meet you for fear of losing caste with my own political friends. Today



seeing you with my accredited leader I have come and it gives me the greatest pleasure to meet you.”

Addressing himself to Fazlul Huq, Gandhiji asked: “What is this quarrel between you and Suhrawardy? I do not like it.” But the Maulvi Saheb again avoided the issue and talked instead of his profession and his chronic trouble — lack of finance! Gandhiji thereupon twitted him for his spend-thrift nature and sent him away laughing.

Somehow people never could remain the same after meeting Gandhiji. It was the same with Maulvi Fazlul Huq. A few days later at an informal discussion with the members of the Mymensingh bar, he told them that what Gandhiji was doing by his good-will mission in the disturbed areas of East Bengal was really praiseworthy. On his part, he added, it was his intention to spend the rest of his life in preaching good-will amongst the Hindus and Muslims just as Mahatma Gandhi was doing. That would make Bengal happy and prosperous.

### 3

After Fazlul Huq's departure, Gandhiji began to make plans for the third phase of his pilgrimage on foot which was to have begun on 2nd March, 1947. He had an elaborate itinerary drawn up criss-crossing the whole of Charmandal area and covering parts of Noakhali and Tipperah. It then led back to Srirampur, from where he had originally started two months ago. From there, he would start over again and cover the remaining portions of Noakhali and Tipperah, and so on till the quest on which he had set out was successful.

But man proposes, God disposes.

The next day Dr. Mahmud's secretary arrived with a letter from Dr. Mahmud. It was a long letter, full of anguish. It reiterated what Dr. Mahmud had written before to Gandhiji that out of the ashes of the conflagration they could perhaps build a new and happy India of their dreams. At the root of the communal problem lay the Muslim fear that they would be wiped out if the Hindus came into power. The Bihar disturbances had provided a God-given opportunity to put an end to that suspicion and fear of the Muslims. Pandit Nehru had set about to do that. As a result, within four days of his arrival, the whole psychology of the Muslims had begun to show a change in spite of their dire misfortunes. “I could once more hold my head erect and tell the Muslims, ‘You see, what I used to tell you is true. The Congress High Command knows no distinction between Hindus and Muslims. It will always take the side of the oppressed, never of the oppressor’.”<sup>11</sup> But the unseemly demonstration of the Hindu students against Pandit Nehru at Patna had not only offset the good effect which Pandit Nehru had produced on the Muslim mind but had deepened their fear and suspicion. “I used to tell the Britishers before,” Dr. Mahmud's letter continued,



"if you do not settle with India in Gandhiji's lifetime, you will live to regret it afterwards. In the same way today I tell the Indian Muslims that if they do not settle the communal question in your lifetime, it will never be settled. That opportunity seems almost to have slipped by. But may be even now if you come, the Hindus might be brought to repentance and the situation still saved."

The most painful part of it was that if facts were as stated, Congressmen could not be absolved from blame. There were stories of unspeakable barbarities having been perpetrated upon Muslims. "I and several women besides me," recorded one of Gandhiji's party afterwards, "could hardly restrain our tears. Bapu sank into deep thought. Poor Mujtaba Saheb (Dr. Mahmud's secretary), his voice grew husky, he could not proceed with the reading of Dr. Mahmud's letter. The moment he had finished, Bapu sent a wire to the Chief Minister of Bihar to ask if he could start for Bihar: 'Dr. Syed Mahmud and others would like me to visit Bihar. . . . Do you feel likewise? Please tell me what you feel.'"<sup>12</sup>

In the evening when Satish Chandra Das Gupta came to discuss with Gandhiji his tour programme, Gandhiji told him instead about his decision to proceed to Bihar and announced the same at the evening prayer gathering. In the course of it he described how till the previous day he had been planning to set out on the third phase of his pilgrimage but at the appointed hour found himself preparing to set out for Bihar instead. He referred to the report which he had received about the atrocities that were said to have been committed by the Hindus of Bihar and before which the happenings of Noakhali seemed "to pale into insignificance". He could not resist Dr. Mahmud's call. He was as concerned about the welfare of the Muslims as of the Hindus. His mind made no distinction between the two. He had sent an urgent wire to the Chief Minister of Bihar and it was highly likely that it might be their last meeting for the time being. In that case, the word he would leave with them for the short time that he expected to be away from them would be that they should live together as brothers. This they would be able to do only if on either side they shed their internal weaknesses and were prepared to lay down their lives without retaliation for the defence of what they considered sacred.

No reply from the Bihar Chief Minister came even on the following day — the 1st March. The whole day Gandhiji looked very grave. Before going to sleep at night he gave directions that the luggage was to be kept ready for the journey next day. All the superfluous gear — books, papers, files etc. — that had been accumulating since his arrival in Noakhali was accordingly packed and sent for safe custody to the Kazirkhil Camp — the headquarters of the Gandhi Camps in Noakhali. Among the things which he kept specially to be taken with him were a "Bengali Teacher" and a Bengali dictionary, and a note-book



in which he did his daily writing exercise in Bengali. The daily Bengali lesson was to him like the call to prayer. He also kept up the practice of having a Bengali devotional song sung at the morning prayer. Far away in Bihar, it brought back to him the call of the Noakhali jungles, the travail of the poor in their humble huts, whom he had left behind, and his "Do or Die" promise to them.

From early morning next day Gandhiji's camp was astir. The air was tense with anxiety. The wrench of separation was on every face. But they all tried to get over it by applying themselves with redoubled diligence to their duty. A heavy pall of mist hung over the place. Only the dull patter from the dripping forest leaves broke the silence. At 11 a.m. the fog lifted and the sun peered through. But the gloom within deepened with the approach of the hour of departure. At last everything was ready for the journey. A number of colleagues and co-workers had come from various centres to bid good-bye and receive final instructions. The most active of them all was the 78 year old Thakkar Bapa. With his precise, methodical habits, he did not rest till he had satisfied himself by a personal inspection that everything had been done according to plan and all the luggage got safely into the jeep. At last Gandhiji emerged from his hut, his hands folded in a farewell and the upper part of the body as usual bare. For the first time after two months he was again seen wearing sandals. It was with difficulty that he could reach the jeep through the besieging crowd. Accompanying him were Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose, Manu Gandhi, Dev Prakash Nayar and Hamid Hunar. He had allowed Dev Prakash to join him to complete his probation in Nai Talim or New Education and Hunar for his training under him in Hindustani work—propagation of Hindustani being an integral part of his programme of Hindu-Muslim unity. All the other members of his party who had originally come with him, he left behind at their respective posts to carry on his work. Like him they were to "do or die" at their posts. Satish Chandra Das Gupta was authorised to represent him in dealing with the authorities during his absence.

The party reached Chandpur at 3.20 p.m. and the quiet peace of the last four months gave place to the din and bustle of congested city life once more. Swarming crowds surrounded the residence of the late Hardayal Nag, the Grand Old Man of Chandpur, where arrangements for Gandhiji's stay had been made. They followed him in the evening to the riverside where his last public prayer meeting in East Bengal was held. It was attended by nearly 30,000.

Addressing the mammoth gathering Gandhiji said that the same reason that had brought him to Noakhali and Tipperah was now taking him to Bihar. He was sorry that he had turned a deaf ear earlier to the pressing requests made to him by Muslim friends to go to Bihar. He had flattered himself with the belief that he would be able to affect the Bihar Hindus from his place in Bengal. But Dr. Mahmud's letter had shown



to him the necessity of proceeding to Bihar. He expected to return to his chosen scene of service — Noakhali — as soon as possible. Dr. Mahmud’s secretary had said they would not detain him for more than a fortnight. Meanwhile Gandhiji hoped that the Muslims would belie the fears of the Hindu refugees that they would not be allowed to live in peace. He appealed to the officials and the police so to conduct themselves as to make the public regard them as their friends and servants on whose tact and willing cooperation they could depend in difficulty.

A member of the audience got up and asked how those who had lost their dear ones or their homes, which they had built through years of sweat and sacrifice, could forgive and forget. How could they, after all that had happened, bring themselves to look upon the community from which the hooligans came with a feeling of brotherhood? The way to forget and forgive, replied Gandhiji, was to contemplate Bihar which had done much worse things than Noakhali and Tipperah. Did they want the Muslims to take revenge for the Hindu atrocities in Bihar? He was sure they did not. From that they should learn to forget and forgive if they did not wish to descend to the lowest depths of barbarity.

At 9.30 p.m. the party boarded the steamer. Huge crowds had gathered at the jetty, too. The last to take leave was Col. Jiwan Singh. His contingent of the I.N.A. had somehow not fitted into Satish Chandra Das Gupta’s scheme. Many discussions had taken place in regard to it before. As Gandhiji scribbled out his final orders that he should send away his men, Jiwan Singh felt hurt and unhappy thinking it was a sort of dismissal for him. A seasoned war veteran, he had finally burnt his boats upon his career of arms from a growing inner conviction in the necessity of non-violence, strengthened by the last behests of Netaji Bose, whom he adored with a soldier’s undivided loyalty. He was about to bid good-bye with a heavy heart when Gandhiji wrote on another slip of paper: “I do not want to lose you personally.” The old Sardar’s countenance beamed. He stayed on in Noakhali even after Gandhiji’s death and added a footnote to the story of inter-Dominion relations between India and Pakistan.

Although the whole of the special steamer had been put at the disposal of Gandhiji and his party, they decided to sleep on the deck with the pressmen as behoved followers of the representative of the poor. As the steamer dropped anchor at Goalando, the party of pressmen, that had accompanied him all through the pilgrimage in Noakhali, came to bid good-bye and with his permission for the last time sang to him the *Walk Alone* song, which had become so interwoven with their experience of the last three months, and what an experience, too, at that!

From Goalando the party proceeded by train, reaching Sodepur at 9.30 at night. On the following day, 4th March, 1947, from 8.45 to 10 Gandhiji was closeted with the Chief Minister of Bengal. He admitted



to Shaheed that things in Bihar were not as well as he had been led to believe. That gave the Shaheed his chance. With a note of bitterness not unmixed with triumph in his voice, he told Gandhiji that Pandit Nehru and Dr. Rajendra Prasad had "betrayed" him. It hurt Gandhiji deeply. Asked afterwards if there was a likelihood of anything fruitful coming out of his talk with the Chief Minister, Gandhiji replied there was hardly any. "He is past master in the art of gab; he went on talking round and round; would not give me a chance to get even a word in edgewise concerning what was uppermost in my mind. Well, let us see, it will be as God wills."

## 4

For half an hour before the departure of the train at Howrah station a continuous stream of coins, small and big, had poured into Gandhiji's outstretched hand as a contribution to the Harijan fund. It took three members of the party to complete the count by sitting upright through the long hours of the night.

"During the half hour at Howrah station," remarked one of the party, "you collected more than all of us put together during the rest of the night at various stations."

"What a pity," replied the Mahatma, "I could not get up at all the stops and relieve people of more!"

In spite of the secrecy that had been observed to detrain him at Fatwa—18 miles from Patna—the usual contingent of newspaper reporters and cameramen was there at the railway station. "Even God Almighty cannot elude the pressmen!" exclaimed Gandhiji.

Out of the thronging crowd on the platform, Gandhiji's eye picked out Dr. Syed Mahmud and Prof. Abdul Bari, the Muslim President of the Provincial Congress Committee, both of them old colleagues and staunch nationalists. "So, you are still alive," he remarked with an attempt at a dry, joyless laugh than which nothing can be sadder.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad with members of the Bihar Ministry and the Provincial Congress Committee met him at Dr. Mahmud's residence as soon as Gandhiji reached there. As Gandhiji sat surrounded by his veteran lieutenants, his head was bowed. All was not well with Bihar. The leaders were apologetic. They had done all they could and would do all he might ask them to do. But that was poor consolation for what had already happened. Dr. Rajendra Prasad had told him that genuine repentance was lacking. In Bihar, Bengal and the rest of India there was a belief that Bihar had "saved" Bengal. The gloom on Gandhiji's face deepened.

The meeting was hurriedly broken up. Gandhiji needed rest. Below his room, within a few yards, flowed the Ganges, calm and resplendent in the morning winter sun—perfect image of his *sthitaprajna*



ideal. During the following weeks, in the midst of his intense preoccupation and gloom, which were to be his lot, he would occasionally steal a glance at its unruffled, placid expanse to drink in its breathless serenity and peace. It became the constant companion of his thoughts whether he sat down by its bank after the evening prayer to write out his daily post-prayer addresses or received people for interviews during his contemplative evening walks. At night he retired to rest, lulled to sleep by its soft murmur and woke up at dawn to its silent message which mingled in perfect harmony with the hymns of the morning prayer.

After bath, midday meal and a short nap he was ready again to meet people. The first to be ushered in were two workers whom Badshah Khan (Abdul Ghaffar Khan) had left behind at Patna. The report they gave was depressing. C.P.N. Sinha, the then Vice-Chancellor of the Patna University, came next.

C.P.N. Sinha: "Well, now that you have come our burden is lightened."

Gandhiji: "I have come to lighten it. I have also wired Badshah Khan to come."

C.P.N. Sinha: "What did Badshah Khan think of the work that is being done here?"

Gandhiji: "He said that the Ministry were agreeable to everything he told them but the officers would not be able to cope with the problem. People alone can do it. He further suggested that there should be a committee for the purpose but it should be purely non-political. I also feel the same way."

C.P.N. Sinha: "There are many Hindus who did good work during the disturbances. Where there were such workers, very little damage was done. The Muslims still have faith in them."

Gandhiji: "All this should never have taken place."

C.P.N. Sinha: "People forgot themselves for a while. Where some care was taken, nothing happened. Congress workers did not check the disturbances at all places as they ought to have done."

Gandhiji: "That is the truth. Advantage lies in admission. Then alone can the remedy be applied."

C.P.N. Sinha: "At places Hindus did their best to protect the Muslims. But the problem calls for whole-hearted, active cooperation of *all* sections. They are ready to give it."

This was followed by another interview with Dr. Rajendra Prasad. What he had said earlier in the day was still rankling like a thorn in Gandhiji's mind. Dr. Rajendra Prasad mentioned how the Muslim League with its National Guards had been preparing for a fight. Arms from Aligarh had been imported into the Province in bulk even after the outbreak of disturbances. To Gandhiji, however, anything that even remotely savoured of self-justification was incompatible with genuine repentance. It jarred.



Dr. Rajendra Prasad told him about the reports of the economic boycott of the Muslims who held almost all the minor professions. In the weddings of Brahmins, Muslim pedlars supplied the bangles. Likewise, the barbers were Muslims. Without them no marriage could be celebrated. It was they who supplied flowers for worship. To tear the two apart when their lives were so closely interlinked was like tearing apart the limbs of a live person.

Nawab Ismail, the Muslim League member of the Provincial Assembly and former President of the Bihar Provincial Muslim League, lay on his bed stricken with tuberculosis. Syed Abdul Aziz, the eminent Muslim Leaguer and stout-hearted champion of Muslims — who extorted respect even from his political opponents for his integrity and ability — also lay dying by inches. Gandhiji felt he should consult them first. The League regarded Gandhiji as enemy No. 1 of the Muslims. So did Abdul Aziz. His observations on Gandhiji in his *Reflections on the Bihar Tragedy* were the palpably unjust aspersions of an embittered mind. But “a touch of nature makes the whole world kin”. Gandhiji spent an hour with Syed Abdul Aziz, making inquiries about his health and persuaded him to take nature-cure treatment. Later he sent for a naturopath from Calcutta to attend on him.

What a conquest the intensely human side of Gandhiji's personality achieved over his opponents is seen from one of Abdul Aziz's letters to Gandhiji: “It is full one month and a half since you were good enough to visit me on the very day you arrived in Patna. I would have been very glad to return your call if it were possible for me to do so even on crutches.”<sup>13</sup> And this in spite of the fact that the rest of the letter was full of deep differences. (See Vol. II, Chap. XV).

Soon after his return from Syed Abdul Aziz, Gandhiji had another long meeting with the Bihar Ministers. “We should make a public confession of our mistake,” he told them. No commission of inquiry had been appointed to date. “If we are not quick about the matter, it will lose its effect. If we do not appoint a commission, we shall be held to have admitted the League's case.” The Chief Minister, Srikrishna Sinha, expressed the fear that the League would make political capital out of it. Gandhiji admitted that that was not improbable. But justice never paused to consider if it would be exploited. “My sixty years' experience has taught me nothing if not that. That is also the lesson of my three months of travail in Noakhali. I was groping in the dark but I said just what seemed to me to be the truth. Those who regarded me as their enemy could exploit it. But I had faith that sooner rather than later they would see their mistake. Be that as it may, my only strength lies in my Ahimsa. The same applies to you also. If you grasp that, you will get over your fear and, undaunted by extraneous considerations, do justice.”

For inviting Gandhiji to Bihar without consulting his colleagues,



Dr. Syed Mahmud was under a cloud. Again and again Gandhiji tried to clear his old friend of unmerited suspicion: Dr. Mahmud's letter which had brought him to Bihar was in reply to his (Gandhiji's) peremptory inquiries; the doctor had not acted disloyally towards his colleagues. Dr. Rajendra Prasad explained that there was really no difference. The Bihar Ministers were never opposed to Gandhiji's coming earlier. But they had judged that the situation might call for the employment of drastic measures; how could they call Gandhiji in that context?

The Chief Minister put in that they had never tried to "minimise" the atrocities. That touched off Gandhiji's pent up feeling. "From what I have been hearing, it seems to me that the Bihar massacre was like Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Dr. Mahmud's wife today brought some Muslim women to me. I had no reply to their tears." Dr. Rajendra Prasad could bear it no longer. He repeated what he had already told Gandhiji that many Biharis thought that they had done well. Gandhiji replied that it was to save them from that sin that he had come. He had told Nawab Ismail that he would "do or die" in Bihar.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad: "I have full faith we shall succeed. Give us orders."

Gandhiji: "In Champaran nobody ordered anybody. It was spontaneous loyalty. You saw the miracle. If that happens here, we shall win over even the League."

The day of painful heart-searching came to a close. It was time for the evening prayer. There was a mammoth gathering. Muslims were present in large numbers. Many *purda* ladies attended the prayer sitting in their cars.

He had flattered himself with the belief, Gandhiji said, that it would be unnecessary for him to visit what he had affectionately called his Bihar. It was, however, no use crying over spilt milk. He hoped that they had done or would do all reparation possible which must in its magnitude be as great as their crime, if their repentance was real. For as the saying went, the greater the sinner the greater the saint. If they adopted an attitude of self-righteousness by putting it all on the goonda elements, for whom the Bihar Congressmen could not be held responsible, they would reduce the Congress to a miserable political party instead of being the one national organisation which, by right of service, claimed to represent the whole of India inclusive not only of Congressmen or its sympathisers but also its opponents. To make good that claim, the Congress must hold itself responsible for the misdeeds of all communities and classes. It was not true to say that no Congressmen were involved in the mad upheaval. That many Congressmen had staked their lives in order to save their Muslim brethren was no answer to the charge that was justly levelled at the Bihar Hindus by indignant and injured Muslims, who in their bitterness had not hesitated to describe the Bihar crime as "without a parallel in history".



That statement could be challenged, Gandhiji continued. But he did not want to be guilty of weighing in golden scales the comparative heinousness of crimes. He was grieved to find that there were thoughtless Hindus in all parts of India who falsely hugged the belief that Bihar had "halted" the mischief that the Muslims in Bengal had let loose. That way of thinking and acting was the way to perdition and slavery. It was cowardice to believe that barbarity such as India had of late witnessed could ever protect a people's culture, religion or freedom. He made bold to say that wherever of late there had been such cruelty it had its origin in cowardice, and cowardice never redeemed an individual or a nation. The way to take reprisals, therefore, was not to copy the barbarous deeds, such as Noakhali had proved itself capable of, but to confront barbarism with manliness, which consisted in daring to die without a thought of retaliation and without compromising one's honour.

## 5

Gandhiji was digging for truth. He met the Ministers and the leaders of the League. Muslim sufferers came and poured out to him their tale of woe. The Friends Service Unit handed him their report. The lethargy of the officials, the absence of a proper relief organisation and the absence of energetic Hindu leadership were holding up the work.

On the morning of the 5th March, 1947, Dr. Rajendra Prasad had a long interview with Gandhiji. Gandhiji told him that he was not yet ready with his plan. On one or two points, however, he had come to a definite decision. He would allow Muslim concentration under certain conditions but he would neither give arms nor Muslim military and police. Instead, he would give them *effective protection*.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad agreed. The danger of concentration, past experience had shown, was that it led the members of the community concerned into foolishly bellicose behaviour which in its turn recoiled upon them. Where the Muslims were in a minority they were protected by the Hindus but where a Muslim concentration existed, the Muslims thought they could cow down the Hindus. The worst tragedies had taken place where the Muslims were in moderate strength. That was not a justification but an explanation of what had happened. The Government would, however, do whatever Gandhiji suggested.

The evening prayer was again held at Bankipore Maidan. Gandhiji's post-prayer speech turned on the theme of *holi*—the colour festival—which fell on the following day. There was fear among the Muslims that the occasion might be marked by renewed attacks upon them. Gandhiji asked the Muslims, as he had asked the Hindus in Noakhali, that they should shed the fear of man and trust in God only. To the Hindus he said



that it was up to them to remove the fears of their Muslim brethren. He hoped that *holi* would be marked by a revival of the old friendly relations between them.

Several influential local Muslims came to see Gandhiji next day. They had all suffered heavily during the disturbances. The exuberance of their gratitude to him for coming to Bihar saddened him beyond words. Trying to laugh away their grief he told them that they should put behind them their own misfortunes, and get ready to proceed to Noakhali to engage themselves there as he was engaging himself in Bihar. If anything untoward happened in Bihar while they were engaged in their Good Samaritan's work in Noakhali, he would pay for it with his life.

A poor, blind Hindu beggar was waiting for him to touch his feet for his blessings, since he could not see him, when he returned from his morning walk. He laid at his feet an amount of annas four in small coins, which apparently he had collected by begging alms, as his humble contribution to the fund for the relief of the Muslim sufferers which Gandhiji had started since his arrival in Bihar. Gandhiji's heart was filled with joy. "This donation of four annas is worth more to me than four crores of rupees," he remarked. "For this poor man has given all he possessed." He affectionately patted the blind man on the back and told him to give up begging forthwith. He further asked one of his party to provide him with a *takli* in case he was willing to learn spinning. In the alternative he gave instructions that Sadaquat Ashram, the headquarters of the Provincial Congress, should provide him with some suitable work to enable him to earn his living.

The whole of the waking time on the 7th March was spent in listening to reports. The Muslim Students' Federation, a League-minded body, regarded contiguous pockets and the division of Bihar as the only condition on which Muslims could remain in Bihar. But Gandhiji was not prepared to accept the view that Hindus and Muslims had parted for ever. He was trying to see how he could repair the breaches in their unity.

The Jamiat-ul-Ulema delegation complained that cases of intimidation of Muslims were still occurring. The Majlis-i-Ahrar supported their view. Another Muslim gentleman came and reported that the crops of Muslim refugees were still being cut and taken away by others. He wanted military assistance for harvesting his crops.

Jayaprakash Narayan, the Socialist leader, had seen Gandhiji a couple of days earlier. His evidence was highly damaging to the Government and the Congress. An even worse indictment came from the Momin community. They had been the worst sufferers despite the fact that they had all along been with the Congress. They alleged that many people high up in the Congress had taken part in the riots.

Other interviewers followed, both Hindus and Muslims. But none



of them was able to assure Gandhiji that things had settled down to the normal. By evening the cumulative effect of these depressing stories had grown so heavy that Gandhiji was forced to take some rest before proceeding to the prayer meeting. It set him weighing himself against his ideal of *sthitaprajna*. When one really reaches that state, one's very thought becomes charged with power so that it becomes self-acting and transforms the environment. He missed that power in him. It was because of that growing feeling within him that of late he had begun seriously to think whether he should not march from village to village in Bihar in the manner of Noakhali so that his thoughts might be conveyed directly to those whom he wanted to bring to repentance.

Bihar was the land of Ramayana, Gandhiji remarked at the evening prayer meeting. However uneducated or poor a Bihari might be, his heart vibrated to the music of that great epic. They knew what sin was and what constituted merit. The misdeeds of which they were guilty were of terrible proportions. Should not their atonement, too, be of the same order? It was in that spirit that they should approach those who had suffered during the riots, and try to do the right thing by them. He had said the previous evening that all Muslim women, who were alleged to be confined in Hindu homes, should be returned. It would indeed be a brave thing, he continued, if the guilty ones came forward and openly confessed their sins and invited expiatory punishment upon themselves. But if such courage was lacking, they could restore the girls to him or to Dr. Rajendra Prasad without any fear of harm coming to them. The looted property should be returned to the owners and the losses compensated for. Where the owners were no longer alive, the looted property or the compensation should be made over to the surviving relatives. That much at least he could surely expect from Biharis who lived in the land of the Ramayana and who tried to set their lives in accordance with the teachings of that noble book.

On the 8th March, Mohammad Yunus came to see Gandhiji. He was Chief Minister of the stop-gap Ministry of Bihar before the Congress finally agreed to accept office in 1937. He agreed that those who had promoted or taken part in the disturbances could be no friends of the Congress even though they might carry the Congress label. His complaint was that the Congress was responsible for the League. If Congressmen had shown vision and broadmindedness earlier, things would not have come to that pass.

Mohammad Yunus was an old friend. Gandhiji felt he could be candid with him. He laid his finger on what had always been a weak spot in the armour of Muslim friends like Mohammad Yunus. "Could Jinnah be left out of the picture? Was it not up to those Muslims who thought that he was going a wrong way to try to correct him?" Mohammad Yunus replied: "Alas! That cannot be. Either you follow Jinnah or you get out of the Muslim League." "Then the future is dark



indeed for Islam and for India—more for Islam than for India,” remarked Gandhiji.

In reply to the question as to how long he expected to be in Bihar, Gandhiji said that he had set no time limit. Islam had not yet forgotten the Karbala, where brother's arm was raised against brother, although it had happened 1,300 years ago. How could he forget his Karbala that was Bihar?

Another Muslim gentleman followed. He owned a soda-water factory. Gandhiji, out of politeness, tried to engage him in conversation on the subject of soda-water and to show off what little knowledge he had of the process of its manufacture. It was a *faux pas*. The gentleman had brought to discuss with Gandhiji a book on Islam, which he had written. He felt insulted by Gandhiji talking soda-water to an author on religion! Frowning darkly, he got up, dismay writ large on his face.

At the prayer meeting that evening, Gandhiji mentioned that he had been pained to receive a telegram telling him that he must not “condemn” the Hindus of Bihar. The sender of that telegram, he remarked, had rendered no service to India or to Hinduism by issuing that warning. He would forfeit his claim to be a Hindu if he bolstered up the wrong-doing of fellow Hindus.

\* \* \*

The Chief Minister of Bihar had told Gandhiji that there was another side to the picture which had not come before him (Gandhiji). Binodanand Jha, a member of the Bihar Cabinet, came on the 9th March to present it to him. He protested that the Government was falsely accused of slowness in dealing with the situation. Immediately after the riots broke out, the Chief Minister had sent him to Gaya and then to Bhagalpur. The disturbances were the result of a “joint conspiracy” between the political opponents of the Congress, who were opposed to the Congress programme of economic reforms, and the British officials in the services. In proof he produced a pamphlet issued by the Hindu Mahasabha and another by the zamindars. Still another pamphlet asked people to organise themselves and take revenge for Bengal as the Congress seemed to be unconcerned about the insult to Hindu women in Noakhali and Calcutta. In Bhagalpur, the Minister complained, the disturbances were precipitated by the Muslim League's propaganda. It was they who after getting the Muslims to congregate in large numbers had set the ball rolling. The Government had information that the arms they had allowed for Muslim defence had reached the Muslim National Guards.

Gandhiji: “I am against the giving of arms.”

After the riots, the Minister continued, the League had deliberately implicated important Hindus. The League did not want things to settle down.



Gandhiji: "In the same way in Noakhali the Muslims complained that the Hindus were accusing wrong persons. I told them we should not be afraid of false cases. But we should not hide true ones. I do not want a single criminal to remain unpunished. The people should themselves come forward and confess their faults."

The Minister: "It was all a reaction against the happenings in Bengal."

Gandhiji: "We should not allow anything to deflect us from doing our duty."

Addressing the prayer gathering in the evening Gandhiji said that correct thinking was the basis of right action. Action based upon imitation even though it might be correct outwardly was incapable of affecting others. On the other hand, when right action was the result of right thought, it automatically affected the thinking of others. If people's thinking were cured of its obliquity, what had happened in Bihar would never be repeated. Such change of heart could not be brought about by legal enactment but only by inducing correct thinking. When true heart change was effected there would be no room left for the sanction of the law.

The more he heard of the Government spokesman's apologia the more he felt the need, he told the members of the Provincial Congress Committee next day, for turning the searchlight inward. He wondered, Gandhiji remarked, if behind his earlier determination to stay on in Noakhali was not "sheer obstinacy" on his part.

The vicarious self-accusation smote one of the members. "Tell us how we can wash off our sin?" he asked. "What are your orders?"

Gandhiji replied that he was ever averse to issuing orders. In Noakhali he could not. In Bihar he could but did not want to. The very nature of the work precluded it. What he wanted was to awaken their conscience and win their reasoned cooperation. With that he let himself go. Since the advent of power, Congressmen had forgotten the path of duty. In a way Muslims had come to believe Jinnah's charge that the Congress did not belong to all, that the Muslims that were with the Congress were there as mere puppets of the Congress with an axe to grind to the detriment and ruin of Islam. If the Hindus were sincere and brave, even the few Muslims that were with them could give the lie to that calumny and enable the Muslim mass to see that they were being misled, and perhaps save them from being so misled.

He had served Bihar before, Gandhiji continued. He had now come to them on what might be his last pilgrimage. If he died striving there, he would have done his duty. All things hung on truth, courage and knowledge. If none of these virtues was there, the future was dark indeed for Bihar and for India.

A Congressman got up to say that some Congressmen *had* taken part in the riot. He was interrupted by another Congressman who



emphatically declared that no Congressman had taken any part in the riot. Gandhiji felt hurt. The gentleman, he cut in, did not seem to know what he was talking about. Even their own colleagues had admitted that some Congressmen had taken part. If their confession was half-hearted they would not gain anything by it. He had said enough. They were all responsible people. They should search their hearts.

After this all left except the Chief Minister and a few others. The Chief Minister explained the genesis of the trouble and how his Government had tried to do all they could before, during and after the outbreak. They were caught unprepared. The Governor was absent. The Chief Secretary and the Inspector-General of Police, both Englishmen, had let them down. British officers were having their revenge for 1942. He was sure, the inquiry would fully vindicate the Bihar Government. Of course, they could not act with the strength of Pandit Nehru, who gave a thorough shaking to the officers. If it could be proved that the Government had intentionally allowed a single Muslim to be killed, said the Chief Minister, they would have no right to remain in office.

• Then, put in Gandhiji, it had to be admitted that there had been lack of foresight. They should not bring in the Governor or the English officers. *The popular Ministers had to act as if the Governors did not exist.* Granting that they (the Ministers) had not been guilty of any wilful neglect of duty, still something was owing for what had actually happened. That needed intelligence, courage and purity of heart. Never had he been confronted with such a stupendous task in his life. Everything turned on what he could do with Bihar and the Biharis. If he succeeded in Bihar, India would be saved, the situation in the Punjab would be controlled, and the Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan would come into their own.

Several correspondents had written to Gandhiji that he was utilising his prayer meetings for disseminating his political ideas. Gandhiji answered that he had never suffered from any feeling of guilt on that account. Life could not be divided into water-tight compartments, nor could ethics be divorced from politics. They acted and reacted upon each other.

Indeed it might be said that the Law which holds together the universe is indistinguishable from the Law-Maker. Speaking in human language, one might say that God Himself is subject to the Wheel of the Law. We are used to the saying "the king can do no wrong". But in God's universe even that distinction is hardly permissible. One can only say that there can be no wrong in the Law, for the Law and the Law-Maker are one and the same. There is no scope for even the least little blade of grass to be free from the operation of God's laws.

Another friend had argued that his "sermons" on religious toleration were all beside the point and unnecessary since the quarrel between



the Hindus and the Muslims was not religious but political; religion had only been used to excite and exploit popular passions. Granting that the issue was political, replied Gandhiji, did it mean that all rules of decency and morality should be thrown to the winds? If they did not learn to settle their political differences decently and in a comradely spirit, only abject slavery would be their lot.

After the prayer meeting was over, Gandhiji stayed on to collect money for the Muslim refugees. The crowd was big and there was such a rush that it was feared many would be crushed. It was a touching sight to see men, women and children in spite of the jostling and the pushing, make their way steadily towards Gandhiji; old women untying a copper from the corner of their tattered *saris* to hand it to him with trembling hands and glistening eyes. That evening's collection came to nearly two thousand rupees. There were, besides, ornaments which yet remained to be auctioned.

The daily round of interviews continued on the 11th March, too. The idea of pockets and the division of Bihar on communal lines had seized hold of the Muslim mind. Even the Jamiat-ul-Ulema, which claimed to be a nationalist organisation, now saw no harm in it. The Congress was accused of having taken part in the riots. Gandhiji received a letter full of abuse. "The only answer to all the violence that fills the atmosphere," he meditated aloud, "can be pure and unadulterated non-violence." He made this the subject of his address at the evening prayer meeting. The lesson of non-violence was present in every religion but perhaps it was in India alone that its practice had been reduced to a science. Innumerable saints had laid down their lives in *tapashcharya* (penance) in this land of *tapashcharya* till poets felt that the Himalayas had become purified into their snowy whiteness by their sacrifice and penance. But that tradition of non-violence was at present nearly dead. It was necessary to revive the eternal law of answering anger by love and violence by non-violence if humanity was to live; and where could that be done more readily than in the land of King Janaka?



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE VEIL LIFTED

#### 1

WHAT HAD happened? What had made the "mild Bihari" turn berserk so that he could indulge in cold-blooded butchery of women and children? One shudders to go into the anatomy of mass madness. What follows is not a judgment but a case-history and must be taken as such.

Like all such manifestations, the Bihar disturbances of 1946 had a long and complicated ætiology. With a few notable exceptions, Bihar, as a Province, had always been the most peaceful. Some of the Bihar Congress leaders, notably Dr. Rajendra Prasad, were respected and liked by Muslims and Hindus alike. The Congress and the Khilafat movements in the twenties had further improved communal relations. But a change gradually came over the scene.

The history of the rise of communalism and how it was captured by reaction in the struggle against the rising tide of democracy has been traced in an earlier chapter. (See Vol. I, Chap. IV). After its rout in the 1937 elections, the Muslim League, in its desperation, threw all moderation to the winds. At the same time, elation at their success made the other side allergic to the bullying of the League.

The success of the Congress Ministries in the various Provinces infuriated the Muslim League. An apocryphal story of Congress "atrocities" on the Muslim minority throughout India was embodied in a brochure known as the Pirpur Report after the name of its author. Another report was published by one Barrister Sheriff of Patna in two volumes. No less a person than Mohammad Ismail, a prominent member of the Muslim League Working Committee and once President of the Bihar Provincial Muslim League, was reported to have remarked to Dr. Rajendra Prasad in the course of a conversation in regard to this report that "seventy-five per cent. of it was admitted to be false on the floor of the Legislative Assembly and the remaining twenty-five per cent. has been proved to be false!" When Dr. Rajendra Prasad, as the Congress President, offered to have the complaints of the Muslim League investigated by an impartial authority and suggested the name of the Chief Justice of the Federal Court—Sir Maurice Gwyer—for the purpose, Jinnah turned down the suggestion saying that "the matter is now under His Excellency's (the Viceroy's) consideration and he is the proper authority to take such action and adopt such measures as would



meet our (Muslim League's) requirements and restore complete sense of security in those Provinces where the Congress Ministries are in charge of the administration."<sup>1</sup> No action was taken by the Viceroy in this regard, so far as one is aware, nor does Jinnah seem to have taken the trouble to pursue the matter with the Viceroy any further.

It is significant that neither the Viceroy nor any of the Governors of the Provinces where Congress Ministries functioned, nor Lord Zetland who remained the Secretary of State for India during the whole period that the Congress Ministries functioned, "ever raised any question of Congress atrocities against Muslims or against any other minorities."<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, more than one Governor of Indian Provinces, including Sir Harry Haig, the Governor of the United Provinces, who, in Dr. Rajendra Prasad's words, "did not suffer from any evil reputation of having a soft corner for the Congress", testified that the Congress rule was "impartial" though it had "brought into the administration both virtues and defects of the democratic system".<sup>3</sup>

In 1939 the Congress Ministries resigned as a protest against the insult to Indian self-respect at India being declared by the British Power a belligerent country without her consent. The Muslim League celebrated the event by observing a "Deliverance Day"! As the tension mounted, "a feeling of exasperation took hold of the Hindus at what they considered the unpatriotic and highly objectionable attitude of the Muslim League."<sup>4</sup> They read from day to day all sorts of threats by the leaders of the League to achieve Pakistan by force. There were scurrilous attacks in the Muslim League Press on Hindu religion and practices. The "Hindus" and the "Hindu Congress" were frequently referred to as "our enemies". All this had a very unfortunate repercussion on the Hindu mass mind all over India, particularly in Bihar.

Then came 1942. The Hindu masses of Bihar had to bear the brunt of repression. The opposition of the League to the "Quit India" movement, which was to them almost a life and death struggle, further widened the gulf between the communities in Bihar. This, coupled with the circumstance that the Muslim League leadership was in the bulk socially reactionary created a feeling in the Hindu mass mind in Bihar, as elsewhere, that "the Muslim League was a barrier not only to the freedom of their country but to the achievement of their own social demands".<sup>5</sup> They denounced the League as the tool of British Power.

The effect of the Muslim League's propaganda on the psychology of the Muslim mass may be illustrated by a very homely instance. Two American members of the Friends Service Unit were touring the Bihar disturbed areas after the riots. In a village a Muslim schoolmaster mistaking them for Englishmen spoke to them in English, saying: "If our own British Government was here, it would be all right. But we do not trust these fellows (Hindus)."<sup>6</sup>



The Calcutta "Direct Action" of August, 1946, set up a double shock wave, one travelling in the direction of Noakhali, the other in that of Bihar, where the first wave ricocheting from Noakhali superimposed itself upon it multiplying its effect many times over. More than a million Biharis earned their livelihood in Calcutta as shopkeepers, rickshaw-pullers, door-keepers, etc. The events in Calcutta from the 16th August onward had resulted in the killing of a large number of them. Till 1911-12, Bihar formed part of the Bengal Presidency. There is in consequence in Bihar a large Bengali Hindu population. The relatives of many of them also were killed in Calcutta. The survivors of those killed or otherwise affected in Calcutta streamed as refugees into Bihar. They spread out in the rural areas carrying stories by themselves gruesome, sometimes exaggerated.

On top of this came the news of Noakhali. Accounts of forcible conversion of large numbers of people, abduction and rape inflame passions anywhere. Hindu sentiment is particularly sensitive to crimes against their womanhood. No single factor was more responsible for what followed than the introduction of this revolting feature into the political struggle associated with the demand for Pakistan. The Biharis became terribly excited, and the Bengali element in Bihar even more so.

After the Calcutta disturbances several mysterious leaflets got into circulation. Some of these were obviously over faked names, others were anonymous. One notice purporting to be issued on behalf of the Muslim League was widely circulated in many parts of India and especially in Bihar. It contained instructions to kill Hindus and their leaders, loot their property and do various other highly abominable crimes in order to establish Pakistan. Who issued this notice nobody seems to know. But apparently it came from Bengal. It is unlikely that any responsible person on behalf of the Muslim League could issue such a notice. Nevertheless in the atmosphere of panic created by the Calcutta and Noakhali happenings, those who read it "became utterly convinced that the Muslim League was bent on indulging in the most heinous crimes in pursuance of its policy of direct action. This, they thought, had to be resisted at every cost, and, if the other party was going to be so thoroughly unscrupulous, the Hindu should not stick to scruple either."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the actions of the League Muslims tended to confirm the worst fears of this section. From time to time vague rumours and reports percolated through from various places that the Muslims were secretly training themselves in the use of arms, and were planning an all-out attack on the Hindus. The propaganda of "racial" superiority harking back to the tradition of Muslim rule before the advent of the British, which the League openly preached, had so coloured the Muslim mind that they forgot their obvious limitations in Bihar. Their almost puerile faith in the cult of the sword, when the sword had lost



its power and survived only as a symbol of the spirit of aggression, proved their undoing.

Towards the end of September, 1946, an incident happened at Benibad in Muzaffarpur district, which touched off the inflammable material that had been piling up. A local Muslim was reported to have abducted a Hindu girl from Calcutta. Demands were made for the girl to be produced. Ultimately the Muslim promised to do so in two to three days. On the appointed day a crowd went to his place. They found that the girl had been removed to another place and the Muslim also had disappeared. Thereupon they got completely out of hand. A number of Muslims were killed and their houses burnt. This unfortunate incident might have been averted but for the accidental breakdown of a police truck carrying a magistrate and armed police to the village.

A pamphlet entitled *Present Miseries of the Hindus of Bihar* issued by the Provincial Hindu Mahasabha at this time gives a picture of the effect of such incidents as the one at Benibad on the minds of the people represented by the communal organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha. The gist of the pamphlet was that there was enough evidence to show that the Muslims in Bihar were planning an organised attack on the Hindus. The latter would have been taken unawares and slaughtered like their co-religionists in Calcutta and Noakhali. The Hindus had "wisely taken time by the forelock" and risen in time to nip the evil designs of the Muslims in the bud. This "national, wise and brave act of the Hindus" was being repaid with extreme severity by the Congress Government. Hindus must, therefore, make it clear to the Congress that they would not allow the power they had given it to be abused!

The fact is that the systematic programme of arson, murder and rape by one community against the other as a political weapon with what looked like the undeclared help of the Muslim League Government of Bengal had so shocked the popular mind that the wildest stories found ready credence and even responsible leaders were led to make statements which ultimately proved to be exaggerated. As a result of the helplessness of the Central Interim Government to take effective steps to check the spread of Muslim violence, there gradually grew up in the Congress a section which, without daring openly to go against the official policy of the Congress, secretly sympathised with the counter-communalism of the Hindus that was coming into existence. The reply of the Bihar Government to Gandhiji's inquiry as to why they did not take action against the editor of *Searchlight* was characteristic: "The article . . . (in *Searchlight*) was . . . objectionable but our difficulty . . . is that in *Dawn* and *Morning News* that come to our Province . . . most incendiary articles are published. If we take action against . . . (*Searchlight*), justice will require that we should take action against no less than a dozen Muslim papers and their editors."<sup>8</sup>



Thus, while the Bihar Government through indecision or confused thinking fought shy of taking timely action, the helplessness of the Interim Government to take any effective action in the matter of Noakhali and Calcutta gradually induced the feeling among the people that nothing by way of redress or protection of the life and property of the Hindus or the honour of their women folk could be expected from the British Power or the Interim Government, who were either unwilling or incapable of keeping in check the Muslim aggression. Such feeling results in the masses taking the law in their own hands.

An agrarian movement of a virulent type, openly advocating violence and class-war, had been going on in Bihar during the thirties under one Swami Sahajanand and had caused no little headache to the Congress High Command. The agrarian unrest to which it had given rise fed the larger movement by providing an excuse to the Hindu tenants of Muslim zamindars for attacking their landlords. Curiously enough, it would appear that some Hindu and even some Muslim zamindars, not realising the consequences of what they were doing, tried to divert the attention of the peasantry from the agrarian issue by canalising it into communal hatred. Similarly, there was a strong, popular sentiment against the black-marketeers. They sought to rehabilitate themselves as the leaders of the community by taking advantage of the feeling against the Muslims. Moreover, the Muslim goondas in any upheaval always attacked their shops. In a number of cases the rioters were fed by well-to-do merchants while in some others they were found to be in possession of guns evidently provided by the zamindars.

The British officers had their grudge against the Bihar Government. Feeling against them had been very bitter since 1942. They did not like the approach of freedom, in which they would lose their long-held privileged position. They were eager to discredit the popular Government. The conduct of some of the permanent officers in that juncture, as Pandit Nehru testified, left the people with a feeling, which may or may not have been justified, that "they were not too greatly displeased at this new embarrassment of the Provincial Government."<sup>9</sup> The mysterious absence of the Governor from the Province, when Bihar faced such a big crisis, between 28th October and 5th November, 1946, was noticed even by *The Statesman*: "Taken alone it may not be very significant. Still in these days of quick communication his continued absence for so long during such critical days is intriguing indeed."<sup>10</sup>

The Press contributed its share to the spread of the poison by giving currency to exaggerated and uncritical reports. The general tenor of newspaper editorials was that the Leaguers were giving dangerous provocation. It was likely to have serious repercussions, which the country might have to rue. Still the Hindus should not retaliate as it was against Gandhiji's teachings and would lead to their own moral bankruptcy. Here is a sample:



We do not believe in a policy of reprisals. Revengefulness defeats its own purpose. But we do insist that it is a matter of honour with the country at large to see to it that the non-Muslim minority in East Bengal is not decimated out of existence by the brutal force of a fanatical majority. . . . We put it to Muslim Leaguers that they will permit the continuance of the atrocities at their peril.

East Bengal is not the whole of India. The time has, moreover, gone by when repercussion of events in a part did not reverberate over the whole of the country. . . . No time should be lost in making it clear to the Bengal Government and Bengal Leaguers that in trifling with decencies of life in the manner they have been doing, they will have to reckon sooner or later with an India so outraged as to feel compelled to twist their tails. Muslim Leaguers who talk glibly of civil-war do not realise what they are after and what insensate insolence must involve sooner rather than later. "Thy sins will find thee out" remains as true today as ever in the past. East Bengal is a challenge to India's manhood.<sup>11</sup>

Lip-service to Gandhiji's ideals, however, could not, and did not, hide the violence reverberating beneath the surface. The Press failed to rise to the occasion and give to the people the correct lead. Nor can the Indian officers in charge of law and order escape their share of the blame. They allowed the prevailing communal passion to take possession of them. This infiltration of communalism into the services and the police played no mean part in the vast destruction that took place. "It is curious," wrote Pandit Nehru to Gandhiji, "how these very officers during the British regime carried out policies against India's national interests."

## 2

The communal situation had been steadily deteriorating in Chapra town, the headquarters of the Saran district, for some time past. A series of incidents of molestation of Hindu women by Muslim ruffians in the latter part of 1946 added to the tension. Divali—the Hindu festival of lights—fell on the 24th October. It was observed for reasons already noted in most places as "Dark Divali". This was exploited by some unscrupulous persons, who asked the Hindus of Bihar to observe it as the day of vengeance upon those who were responsible for making the Divali "dark". On the other hand, in Chapra town a prominent Muslim Leaguer committed the blazing indiscretion of exhorting his co-religionists in a mosque to rejoice because the Hindus were celebrating a joyless Divali: *Aj Hinduon ke ghar me matam ho raha hai. Ham logon ko aj jashan manana chahiye.* (Today there is mourning in Hindu homes. Let us celebrate it by rejoicing and feasting.)

On the 25th October, in several towns meetings were held to protest against the atrocities in East Bengal. The meetings were not prohibited because it was felt that pent up feelings would blow up with



a terrific explosion unless some legitimate form of expression was allowed. The trouble flared up almost immediately at Chapra. In the course of the afternoon and evening there were disturbances in about nine places. Altogether fifty incidents were reported. Police opened fire on three occasions at three different places. Several incidents of stabbing and rioting took place even on the 26th October. The Superintendent of Police stopped a large Hindu mob from advancing towards the town from the riparian area on the 26th October by firing thirty rounds. But the trouble had spread in the meantime to the rural areas of the district, where it continued for nearly five days. It then died down suddenly and after the 31st October there were only a few sporadic attacks.

The local Congress leaders began to arrive in the town from the 26th October. They started touring the interior. On their way they encountered mobs numbering sometimes 50,000. The mobs turned back when they were told that what they were doing might cost them Gandhiji's life. By the 27th October all the Congress leaders of the district had arrived and after forming themselves into batches penetrated into the villages. From the 28th October onward no planned attack was reported at any place in the district. The Chief Minister arrived in Chapra on the 28th October in company with his colleague Dr. Syed Mahmud. What they saw flabbergasted them:

We started (by plane from Ranchi) on the 28th October and reached Chapra the same night. About hundred houses had been burnt in the town. About six thousand people had taken refuge in the district school and were in a very bad plight. The next day we went to Paigambarpur. It is a big village. About 50 houses had been burnt here. A similar number of men, women and children had been murdered and burnt in these houses. The police were there. The Muslims said that the sub-inspector had joined the rioters.

As soon as we reached Chapra, we sent three or four Congressmen.... These people reached Paigambarpur by 3 a.m. Even then they extricated three people from the fire and saved their lives. The police by that time had disappeared. When Sri Babu (the Chief Minister) and I went there, we saw some frightened women sitting under a tree crying. Skulls and bones met our feet as we trod through the lanes. A man, who had been burnt to charcoal, was found in a sitting posture in one house. In another house the fire was still smouldering. The door outside had been locked. One woman caught hold of our feet and began to cry. She said that the village watchman had snatched her baby from her lap and cut it into two. Sri Babu could not check his tears. He mentioned the incident next day in his speech at Muzaffarpur. Another woman said that she had given all her savings amounting to some thousands in order that the rioters might spare her two little children. The money was taken, but the children were murdered in her very presence. Most of the villagers here were middle class people. Many Muslims complained that the Indian collector at



Chapra had taken an important part in the riot. Some of the things that he was reported to have done and said were beyond description.<sup>12</sup>

On 31st October they returned to Patna. Reports of disturbances in Patna district also had in the meantime begun to pour in. "We sent for the Brigadier in charge of the military to provide military assistance. He said it was unnecessary. . . . In the evening news came that a large number of wounded, including a proportion of old men, women and children, had arrived at Patna and Taregna stations. Two of the wounded women were pregnant. . . . About 50 bodies were lying on the Taregna station even two or three days after."<sup>13</sup>

The next day they went to Ranchi to see the General in command of the military forces. From the air they saw below a big village in flames. A mob of ten thousand was surrounding it. "People were literally imprisoned in their homes. Women and children had assembled on their thatched roofs weeping and wailing piteously. They frantically waved their arms to draw our attention as our plane passed overhead. Sri Babu could not stand it. He wept."<sup>14</sup>

On the 2nd November, while returning to Patna after meeting the General, they again saw several villages burning and the mob engaged in looting. Some villages were completely deserted; others were besieged by mobs. In the afternoon they made another flight over Patna district and saw several more villages burning. All this took place within a distance of ten to fifteen miles from Patna, the capital of the Province. "The indifference and negligence of the district officers," reported Dr. Mahmud to Gandhiji, "seemed to beggar description. In the words of Pandit Nehru, 'even if they had walked, they could have reached the sites of occurrence in time'."<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Mahmud's report continued: "About three and a half lakh Muslims are said to have fled from Bihar to different places after selling their gold ornaments at a ridiculous price and their homes and properties for a song. In one village alone of Tilhari, I saw 5 wells full of dead bodies and another 10 to 12 wells similarly choked with the dead in Dharla village. Where there was a river in the vicinity, the dead bodies were thrown into it. Their number cannot be ascertained. The killed included a high proportion of old men, women and children. . . . There was a large number of infants in arms among the wounded in hospitals. . . . Some women told me how their little ones were murdered in their laps."

Alongside of this Dr. Mahmud saw some sights of a different type, too. He was particularly moved by one such incident. He had gone with a special train to bring some refugees and wounded back from Fatwa station. "It was then 2 a.m. The refugees were waiting to board the train with their baggages. Some of their Hindu brethren had accompanied them carrying the latter's bundles on their heads. At parting



they wept and tried to board the train with the Muslims. On being asked the reason, they replied, 'Who will help to carry their baggages when they detrain?' I was standing close behind. What a revelation of humanity in the midst of general carnage and brutality! Verily man is a strange mixture of the brute and the angel! As Sri Babu put it, it was not a clash between Hindus and Muslims but between barbarism and humanity."<sup>16</sup>

From Chapra (Saran district) the trouble spread to Monghyr, Bhagalpur, Santhal Parganas, Patna and Gaya districts. The worst affected of all were Patna district and town. On the 25th October a procession was taken out in Patna in observance of East Bengal Day. It terminated in a big meeting at Bankipur Maidan presided over by Prof. Abdul Bari, the Muslim President of the Provincial Congress Committee. Highly objectionable slogans were shouted by a section of the procession in spite of the assurance of the organisers to the contrary. Attempts were made at the meeting by a section to pass a resolution calling on the Hindus to avenge Noakhali. These were resisted by the President and some other prominent persons. The meeting and the procession were repeated the next day. But unlike Chapra, with the exception of one stabbing incident, trouble was averted as a result of elaborate precautions taken by the authorities.

The Muslims gave evidence of previous preparation. On the night of the 27th October, armed with lethal weapons they issued forth shouting their slogan of Allah-o-Akbar and set about collecting isolated Muslims at appointed centres. They were concentrated on one side of the railway line. Their shouts brought out the Hindus from surrounding localities in their thousands on the other side of the line. A serious clash was averted by the timely arrival of the police and the intervention of Congressmen but the retiring mobs spread all sort of rumours in the villages with the result that a section of the crowd turned towards village Kumarhar near Patna City. Another mob began collecting in another village. Congress workers with the help of the police were able to control the mobs at both the places. This was on the 28th October. Thereafter the conflagration spread with lightning speed in the rural areas in Patna sub-division.

Disturbed conditions were reported from Phulwari Sharif and Poonpoo police stations (Patna district) on the 29th and 30th October followed by the first terrible massacre at Masaurhi. The wave of disturbances then spread in the south-east direction towards Bihar Sharif and another wave towards the northern border of the Jehanabad sub-division in the district of Gaya.

On the 27th October the local authorities at Patna, under instructions from the Commissioner, had requested the local military for aid. But until 31st October, the Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Creed, who should naturally have been the best person on the civil side to decide



the matter, was of the considered opinion that the situation was well within the control of the police. On the 31st October the request for military help in Patna was again pressed. The Brigadier, however, did not think that any necessity had so far arisen. He said that the situation was not "nearly so bad as yet as in 1942".<sup>17</sup>

The magistrates and the troops took up their positions in the interior of the Patna sub-division in batches between the 3rd and the 4th November. By the 5th November Gandhiji's partial fast as a penance for Bihar disturbances had commenced. Leaflets containing Gandhiji's resolve to fast unto death if the insanity continued and asking people to stop the mad orgy were dropped from the air over very large areas. As a result the mad frenzy which had seized the people died down as suddenly as it had commenced. Before that, tear-gas bombs had been dropped from the air. According to Pandit Nehru, "they did not seem to frighten the crowd much".<sup>18</sup>

Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel accompanied by Liaquat Ali Khan and Sardar Abdul Rab Nishtar arrived in Patna on 3rd November. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad and Acharya Kripalani joined Pandit Nehru soon after and began touring the affected areas. They were followed by the Viceroy.

Addressing a big gathering at Patna on 6th November, Pandit Nehru said: "It is a matter of shame for me to come down here and ask you to observe the basic principles of civilised conduct when so many problems, national and international, are facing us and need solution. . . . By no standard of civilised conduct can acts of lawlessness and killing of neighbours be justified. There can be no justification for stooping to bestiality, simply because some fellows have lost their heads elsewhere. . . . What is happening in the Province is pure and simple hooliganism and it is your first and foremost duty to stop it at once at all costs. You cannot shift the responsibility by simply saying that you did not take part in it individually."

Dr. Rajendra Prasad reminded his Province that its fair name had been besmirched. What had happened was absolutely disgraceful and could not be allowed to continue for a day longer. The Government were determined to put it down at all cost, but it would be a shame if they had to resort to force. Acharya Kripalani remarked: "By indulging in such acts, you have only helped your enemies inside and outside the country and have proved traitors to the country's cause."

These meetings held in the affected areas were very largely attended by the peasantry from the villages round about. Pandit Nehru at the end of every meeting made the audience to take a pledge, with arms upraised, never again to indulge in such misbehaviour. Subsequent reports stated that these peasants, who had so pledged themselves, felt the weight of their promise "and in fact told others that now that they had given their word they must act up to it".<sup>19</sup>



But large areas in the interior remained untouched by these meetings. Nor could the inadequate force at the disposal of the Provincial Government at that time develop contact with the trouble makers. The mob melted at one place and reappeared elsewhere. The arrival of the military made it possible for the first time to establish effective contact with the forces of disorder. The presence of top-ranking Congress leaders and the lead they gave galvanised the whole administrative machinery. Prohibitory orders under the Criminal Procedure Code and the curfew were enforced and firing resorted to at a number of places. The hard core of the lawless elements was thus broken. It enabled Pandit Nehru as early as the night of 6th November to report to Gandhiji: "On the whole the situation is quietening down." During their flight over Patna, Monghyr and Gaya on the 7th November, they found "the general outlook to be very peaceful, with peasants tilling the field".<sup>20</sup> By 8th November he could report: "As far as one can judge, the mass movement against the Muslims is over".<sup>21</sup> There was also a new tendency visible which was hopeful: "Muslims suggested that the evacuees should return to their villages where they still existed so as to look after their property which they had left in a hurry, and to cut their paddy crops which were ripe. There was danger otherwise of these being cut and taken away by others. Thus, the primary instinct of self-preservation was giving place to the love of property. This in itself was indication of the return of some measure of normality."<sup>22</sup>

On the 14th November, after a week's stay in Bihar, Pandit Nehru, in a statement on the floor of the Central Legislative Assembly, said: "The Bihar situation was brought completely under control after a week. . . . This rapid ending of a widespread movement, which was on the verge of spreading to other districts, was remarkable. The military of course came. . . . But a much more powerful factor in this restoration of order was the effort of a large number of persons, chiefly Biharis, who spread out all over the villages and came face to face with the masses. The news of Mahatma Gandhi's proposed fast also had a powerful effect."

Six districts out of sixteen were affected by the disturbances. The total number of villages involved was 750 out of the total of 18,869 in the six affected districts. The total number of houses damaged or destroyed, according to Government information, was 9,869. A total of 2,186 rounds were fired by the police and the military killing over 393 people and injuring about 100. It would be difficult to give an exact estimate of the death role. The Government's final figure of the Muslims killed was in the neighbourhood of 5,400. The Friends Service Unit estimated that the number killed could not exceed 10,000. The truth perhaps lies somewhere between these two figures.

There had been cases of abduction, rape and forcible conversion, too, in Bihar. Their number was unknown. In the words of Pt. Nehru,



“the nature of the upheaval was such that this did not fit in with it”.<sup>23</sup> But the actual figure is immaterial. The fact remains that the Hindus of Bihar, to their shame, had tarred themselves with the same brush as the Muslims in Bengal and dragged India’s name in the mire.

## 3

The Bihar disturbances of 1946 finally shattered the dream of an undivided India. It enabled Jinnah to moot his favourite idea of exchange of populations which had hitherto not been regarded as practical politics, and to press for indefinite postponement of the Constituent Assembly, which Pandit Nehru regarded as a means of killing it and which the Quaid-i-Azam regarded as a life-and-death issue with the League.

The League was not slow to make capital out of the upheaval in Bihar. Some of the headlines of the Bihar Muslim League’s report on the Bihar disturbances dated 1st December, 1946, were as follows: “International crime of genocide in Bihar.” “Greatest massacre in dated history committed by Hindu Congress Fascism.” “Over fifty thousand Muslims slaughtered.” “Half-a-million rendered homeless refugees.” The leaders of the Congress party and the Congress Government were accused of having formed “an underground council of war against the Muslims which planned and executed the massacres of Muslims and worked as the High Command of the campaign of mass-killing.” The Bihar Premier, who was regarded even by the Muslims as their true friend, was described as having issued “written orders under his own signature to Government officers that no help is to be given for evacuation and rescue work and that this order is to be strictly followed.” Jayaprakash Narayan, a nationalist to the core, was dubbed a “communalist” and “at the back of the riot”. The League’s accusations were so reckless that Pandit Nehru was constrained to remark that the League document “is so wild and irresponsible . . . that it becomes impossible to attach importance to what they say”.<sup>24</sup>

Gandhiji’s considered verdict after a painstaking scrutiny of all the evidence that had been brought to him in Noakhali was contained in his letter of 18th January, 1947, to his “old and tireless correspondent” Barrister Ali Hussain: “I am firmly of opinion that whilst the Bihar Ministry may not be accomplices in the crime committed by the Bihar Hindus, to their shame and disgrace, as responsible Ministers, they could not be acquitted of responsibility for the behaviour of crowds within their jurisdiction.”

As it was, the truth was ugly enough even without the League’s embellishments. The Muslims pointed out that the Government had ample warning. A widespread Congress organisation was in existence in the Province; yet the tragedy took place. When the disturbances



broke out, governmental help rarely arrived in time, despite desperate attempts on the part of the Muslims, who contacted the local and higher authorities. And this in spite of the fact that police stations were near at hand. Syed Abdul Aziz tabulated the distances from the police stations of some of the affected villages which showed that although Muslims were murdered and mutilated sometimes within a few yards of—in no case more than two miles from—the police station or the magistracy, no action was taken for days to save their lives or property. For instance, Poonpoo and Hilsa were within 100 yards of the police station; Masaurhi and Taregna railway stations within 300 and 400 yards respectively; Chistipore and Palwalpore within half a mile; Attasarai and Manaura within one mile and Kaila within one and half miles distance from the police station. In some cases the rioting went on in the presence of the officers who incited the mob. This provided Syed Abdul Aziz ground for his stricture that “if the officials and the police had any sense of their duty and determination to protect the Muslims, at least 100 constables, 15 sub-inspectors, 10 inspectors, 2 District Superintendents of Police, 10 Magistrates and 2 District Magistrates should have allowed themselves to be killed or injured before they allowed thousands of men, women and children under their direct charge to be slaughtered mercilessly.”

It was the general impression among the Muslims that the police officers, who were callous to the Muslims, were promoted over the heads of those who helped them, and in at least one or two cases their suspicion was not altogether groundless. After the riots, the ringleaders were not punished. Counter-cases were started against the other community as in Noakhali. The Ministry were not uniformly firm in their orders and their declared policy, and orders were not always backed by appropriate administrative action. In Benibad Rs. 45,000 were granted to be distributed amongst the Muslim sufferers, but were not distributed till Gandhiji arrived on the scene. The services, on the whole, especially at the local level, did not show that combination of tact, firmness and strictly unbiased conduct which is expected of the trustees of law and order. It is possible that there were instances where such neglect of duty was shielded by superior officers who were equally communal-minded.

The fact of the matter seems to be that the atmosphere was highly charged; the slightest incident served to touch off the gun-powder. In some places minor incidents between Hindus and Muslims arising out of personal vendetta took a serious communal turn resulting in mob attacks on Muslims. A mob in Marhaura police station (district Saran) was alleged to have been led by a constable of Bengal police whose father was killed in Noakhali. In Hasua police station (district Gaya), a *goala* (cowherd) who had lost several members of his family in Calcutta disturbances was alleged to have led a mob. The mobs responsible for the tragedies in Masaurhi, Poonpoo, Ekangarsarai and Hilsa police



station (district Patna) were led by one Mathura Singh of Ghosi police station (district Gaya) who was a habitual criminal. A *babaji* (hermit) residing in a temple at Hilsa was reported to have incited the Hindus of the neighbourhood to avenge the death of a Hindu boy who was shot by a Muslim doctor in Hilsa bazar. And so on.<sup>25</sup>

When the masses get into fighting mood, and passions are inflamed, the first missile is fired not necessarily by the stronger party. Very often it is the result of panic. Sometimes it is just a boiling over. The generally bellicose policy of the Muslim League had created an aggressive mentality in the majority of Muslims. In an unorganised mass-upheaval attacks and counter-attacks are isolated and depend upon the caprice or momentary impulse of a section or even an individual, for whose indiscretion large numbers have to pay. A sense of local advantage blurs the reality of the situation and gives to the people a false feeling of confidence which often leads them into foolishly provocative behaviour. At many places where Hindus were in a minority, they had to flee for their lives.<sup>26</sup>

The Hindus in Muslim majority areas had hitherto been docile. Most of them were poor and dependent upon the well-to-do Muslim gentry, landed or other, for their livelihood. They had long been victims of class oppression. In Poonpoo, for example, the Kali procession had not been allowed by the Muslims for years. It was only in 1947 after Gandhiji's arrival that it became possible to take it out as a result of intercession by a member of Gandhiji's party. These long-standing grievances suppressed and accentuated by Pax Britannica made the revenge all the more ruthless; and thousands of villages from round about stormed Muslim pockets. When they met with resistance, as they generally did, or when the Muslims started the aggression, they returned with still further reinforcements.

The administrative help was mostly delayed owing to the suddenness and vastness of the upheaval, the difficulty of communications owing to the rains, and the inadequacy of the normal forces of law and order at the disposal of authority. But it was due also to the inherent departmental red-tape and the infiltration of communalism in the services. The instructions of the Provincial Government, however, were clear. To suppress the mob and escort the refugees to places of safety. But the local officers in many places did not rise to the occasion owing to either communalism or fear or sheer incapacity. The result was an unparalleled tragedy.

In its article *Disgraced Also*, on 8th November, 1946, *The Statesman* observed: "A pogrom of such magnitude could hardly happen without premonitory signs. Yet . . . the local administration seems to have been caught unawares." In the course of another article on 13th November, it wrote:

Not only does Bihar's tragedy resemble Bengal's worse one in severity.



There can be found dismal similarity in other particulars. Governors slow-moving or not on the spot; Ministers apparently at the outset divided in mind whether some rioting would not be good or bad, and later, amidst the crisis of carnage, quite incapable of disciplining the mob. An administrative machine deficient in perspicacity and precautions and exhibiting in parts disquieting symptoms of a fundamental mental demoralising.

*The Statesman* went on to say:

Bihar, however, has at least been relatively fortunate in this: that the services of more eminent personages have been promptly available to her than to forlorn Bengal in her several earlier afflictions. The Governor's absence at the critical time has indeed evoked remark. But among the influential visitors from the Centre, Pandit Nehru, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Mr. Kripalani have all been trenchant and unsparing in denunciation of barbarities wrought by their co-religionists upon a minority weak in numbers.

And again:

Pandit Nehru has not only again shown exemplary physical and moral courage; more important, he exhibited complete disregard, in India's and humanity's interests, of formidable criticism from narrow-minded members of his own community—both inside and outside the Province.

For the humanitarian, there was one further consolation. Even in the midst of the prevailing insanity there were people who retained their sanity and saved Muslims at the risk of their lives. The following incidents were reported by Hamid, D.I.G., C.I.D. — a Muslim — in his report of 18th December, 1946:

The *goalas* of Ganj (Barh police station) protected the lives of 600 Muslims of Ahijan. In another village, Hindus gave shelter to nearly 400 Muslims of neighbouring villages. When a Hindu mob surrounded the village and asked the local Hindus to hand over the Muslims to them, the Hindus turned out in a body to fight the mob with the result that the latter had to beat a retreat. "The attack was repeated . . . with the same result." At still another place, a mob raided some villages in order to kill the Muslims but the local Hindus put up a united front and made it clear to the attackers that they would not be permitted to touch any Muslims without a fight. The mob ultimately retired. In a mixed village of Rajputs and Muslims, the Rajputs turned up in a body to fight the attacking mob and made them change their mind. A resident of Kansari (Fatwa police station) kept 38 Muslims concealed in his own house for 14 days. "The mob made two attempts on his house and demanded the surrender of Muslims, but . . . with the assistance of his co-villagers . . . (he) frustrated their attempts." Hindu and Muslim residents in a village in Hilsa police station gave a combined fight to an attacking mob killing 10 and injuring several others. Several



Hindu Congressmen were severely assaulted in Parsa Bazar by a Hindu mob while they were attempting to save the life of a Muslim doctor who was ultimately saved by them. "A Hindu woman was assaulted by a Muslim in Maharajganj (Saran district)." Thereupon a Hindu mob attacked the Muslim area of the village and wanted to kill all Muslims and set fire to their houses. They did set fire to one house. While this was going on, one Rajput girl "turned up on the scene, and tried her best to persuade the mob to retire. When persuasion failed, she threatened to jump into the burning house. This produced the desired effect and the mob retired." Similar reports of Hindus protecting the lives and property of the Muslims were received from many places in the disturbed areas.

## 4

The Bihar disturbances demonstrated that democracy without proper political education of the electorate is like a house built on sand. Freedom of speech is a dangerous instrument when the masses are ignorant. Led astray, they hold the Government, which is their servant, in their grip. Secondly, when the majority turns against the minority, no Government, least of all a democratic Government, can save it. It is impossible to put an armed constable at the disposal of each individual. And when the poison spreads, Government servants are as likely to be affected by it as others. They can then with all the more impunity defy the impartial policies of the Government. No democratic Government can afford to dismiss all its officers or shoot all the people. Gandhiji had, therefore, to say in Noakhali that if the majority community did not want the minority to remain in their midst, he would have no alternative but to ask them to migrate. The minority can remain in the midst of the majority only by winning the latter's friendship. Hence, those who taught the minority to regard the majority as their "enemies" and severed the age-long link of friendship between the two, lightly played with the lives of millions, whose cause they professed to champion. The third important lesson of the riot was that Government machinery had become wooden. Even in normal times it moved at a snail's pace. In an emergency it proved to be altogether inadequate.

When Gandhiji arrived in Bihar in March, 1947, the Hindu masses had sobered down. The Muslim League had started full-scale offensive against the Government. The Government were flabbergasted by what had happened. The Congress organisation had begun to show symptoms of inner rot which became so marked immediately before and after independence.

The Bihar Government were confronted with a stupendous refugee relief and rehabilitation problem. It was made all the more difficult by the attitude and actions of the Muslim League and the Bengal



Government. They systematically filled the minds of the Muslims, who were already dazed by what had happened, with fear about their future, and lured them by promises of free grant of land in Bengal.

By the 5th November, 1946, it was felt that the Government was going to be faced with a tremendous refugee problem. A refugee organisation was, therefore, set up under the Relief Commissioner, Mr. Houlton, I.C.S. Government camps were established in towns. But the Muslim League would not agree to certain sites being selected, for reasons best known to them; and as in the beginning, it was thought wise to take all relief measures in consultation and agreement with the Muslim League and other volunteer organisations to avoid unnecessary friction and misunderstanding, there was inevitable delay. In the mofussil, where simultaneous arrangements were made for opening relief camps it was comparatively easy as the Muslim League was not fully prepared to make arrangements for them.

In the beginning free rations were supplied to the political organisations for the number of refugees they claimed to have under their care. For proper organisation and protection of the refugees, Government camps were established. But it was only with difficulty that the League was persuaded to allow refugees to go into the Government camps, and this in spite of the fact that the League volunteers were allowed to carry on the detailed management of the camps.

The expenses of feeding the refugees continued month after month, as the League was obstructing rehabilitation and the Muslims, not only Muslim Leaguers, had in a measure lost confidence in the Government. The stern measures adopted by the Government after the outbreak of the disturbances and the military firing on the Hindus at a number of places were grossly exaggerated by the Hindu Mahasabha leaders. These, with the large number of arrests made in connection with communal riots etc., had cost the Government its popularity among the Hindu masses too.

The loosening of the administrative machinery in the new democratic set up yet in its infancy, and the post-war corruption, nepotism and jobbery, in which Bihar had its full share with other Provinces, had made the Government's work still more difficult. The landlords were angry with the Government because of its proposed abolition of zamindari, the peasants because things were not proceeding rapidly enough. Blame for food and cloth shortage and black-marketing, which had been an all-India phenomenon since the war, was also laid at the door of the Government by its opponents, who were but too eager to exploit such an opportunity. The services had been tampered with. The Government was faced with a stupendous task with many enemies and few friends.

The Muslim League had come out in the open to exploit the situation. The Ispahani lorry went from village to village, frightening the Muslims, who had remained behind during the riots, into leaving their



homes to swell the number of refugees in the camps, or to go to Bengal which was held out to them as the land of promise. It was estimated that by the middle of January, 1947, about 75,000 had gone to Bengal. The Muslim League volunteers went about asking and influencing people to leave their homes and generally creating a mentality of distrust and fear.

In one of his letters to Gandhiji in Noakhali, Dr. Rajendra Prasad wrote: "I am only worried about one thing. Muslim League volunteers have come from different directions and far off places. Many of them are in uniform. One hears that they have said things in places which are likely to excite passions. . . . The Muslim League is still going its way. It is being propagated that unless Pakistan is established, tragedies like the present will continue to recur. It is feared, therefore, that the tension might continue. If both the parties had been equally anxious, all things would have been settled very quickly. But only one side is really working for establishing peace."<sup>27</sup>

To infuse confidence in the riot-affected Muslims, the Government gave charge of the refugee camps to the Muslim League volunteers. This was a double mistake. The Leaguers dug themselves in. Their volunteers maintained themselves on the rations. They told the refugees that the rations "were sent by Jinnah Saheb". Mistrust and hatred of the Government and the Hindus was worked up to a fever pitch, which prevented the refugees from going back to their villages. In one of his letters to Shaheed Suhrawardy, Pandit Nehru wrote: "Even when I was there (in Patna) I found the Muslim League coming in the way of the Government's efforts to help the refugees and evacuees. They did not want this help to be given directly but only through the League. This seemed to me odd as Government was in fact seeking the cooperation of the League in every way. The League . . . refused at first to allow refugees to go into the Government's camps and kept them in very insanitary conditions in the city till an outbreak of cholera forced them to change their policy. The impression I gathered was that the Bihar League was more interested in making political capital than in helping the evacuees to find suitable accommodation etc. That impression had persisted and has been strengthened by subsequent reports."<sup>28</sup>

The camps became the League's close preserves. No Congressmen or Government servants were allowed to enter them. If they did, they were insulted and abused. In his next letter to the Bengal Chief Minister Pandit Nehru observed: "I might add that even now the Government camps in Patna are largely run by Muslim League volunteers who have sometimes not allowed Government agents to go inside the camps. You will realise that it is an odd situation for the Government to organise a camp, to pay for all expenses and then to have its own representatives treated in this manner by outside volunteers."<sup>29</sup>

Another tactic the Leaguers employed was to carry out a virulent



propaganda against the Ministry in the League Press and to send all sorts of distorted news to the League leaders outside, especially to the Chief Minister of Bengal, who took an almost insulting interest in the affairs of the Bihar Government. A statement was issued by the Director of Relief, Bengal Government, on the 16th December, 1946, which appeared in *The Statesman* of 18th December (Dak edition) under the headlines: "Bihar refugees in Bengal: No arrangement for repatriation yet." In the course of this statement the Director of Relief reported that the Bengal Government had addressed a note to the Bihar Government regarding the size and difficulties of the problem of refugees from that Province to Bengal and had asked for information about the Bihar Government's plan for their repatriation but had received no reply. Actually, the Bengal Government's communication was received by the Bihar Government on the 16th December, the very day on which the Director of Relief made his statement to the Press.<sup>30</sup>

Distorted truths and absolute falsehoods, purveyed to Shaheed Suhrawardy, evidently by the Bihar Muslim League, were passed on to Gandhiji in Noakhali by the Bengal Chief Minister. Here is a typical instance: The District Magistrate of Monghyr — a Muslim — had felt it necessary to prevent the entry of unauthorised persons into the refugee camps under his charge and had put into force the order "entry-by-pass only". Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Bengal Muslim League leader, was stopped by the sentry at the gate because he did not possess a pass. The Bihar Relief Commissioner, Mr. Houlton, had similarly been stopped a few days before because he had forgotten to bring his. Malik Firoze Khan Noon, another Muslim League leader, had visited the camp a few days earlier with a pass and had no difficulty. So obviously there was no intention of preventing Khawja Nazimuddin from entering the camp. These facts were reported to Gandhiji by Shaheed Suhrawardy as follows: "All the refugees are under military guard and no outsiders are allowed to visit the camps nor are the refugees allowed to contact anyone from outside."<sup>31</sup> And this despite the fact that the military had been posted at the camps at the express wish of the refugees and the League, "the detailed management of nearly all Government camps has throughout been in the hands mainly of the Muslim League volunteers and leaders"<sup>32</sup> and the workers of the Muslim League as well as other members of the public had free access to all refugee camps except for a short period in certain camps in Monghyr. Even in those camps, "the Muslim League volunteers were allowed and are being allowed to work among the refugees."<sup>33</sup>

The Bengal Government continued to act as a clearing house for all distorted and exaggerated news from Bihar which the ingenuity of the Provincial League could invent. It next proceeded to do another extraordinary thing. It sent one of its officers to Bihar with the professed object of "co-ordinating" the work of Muslim relief parties from Bengal.



Actually the main activity and concern of this officer seems to have been to stimulate the exodus of the refugees to Bengal and to collect and concoct blackmailing material against the Bihar Government. The Bihar Government took exception to this unwarranted interference by the Government of a neighbouring Province in its affairs, and informed the officer that his activities were unwelcome and he must go back.

The exodus to Bengal had also a sinister aspect. The districts in which the immigrants were or were proposed to be settled, were all on the border of Bihar. The aim obviously was to turn these border areas into Muslim majority areas. This border was contiguous with the Santhal Parganas of Bihar, where a secret document revealed that the Muslim League had plans to foment a movement for independent Jharkhand by the aboriginals of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas. This Jharkhand would seek union with the aboriginals of the Central Provinces and finally link up with Hyderabad which was seeking an outlet to the sea at Goa on the western sea coast of India. (See Chapter XV). The Muslim League demand for contiguous pockets for the Muslims, and finally the division of Bihar, had a similar significance and will be found dealt with in another chapter. (See Chapter XV). These demands were, of course, rejected. The unreasonableness of the League at last forced the Government to stop further negotiations with it. In a mood of self-righteous indignation the League, thereupon, declared its "non-cooperation" with the Government, which in plain language meant preventing the refugees from returning to their homes, keeping the League's hold tight on the refugee camps and carrying on a virulent propaganda in the League Press.

Even Gandhiji's *bona fides* were questioned, though some Muslim Leaguers in their lucid intervals came and told him that he alone could save them. Even Syed Abdul Aziz could write as follows: "Can a dispassionate patriot and practical statesman expect peaceful and normal political activities, free from acerbity, when Mr. Gandhi's propaganda through his prayer meetings, with his special technique, is broadcast daily all over India and abroad? Is there a single pontifical leader or political philosopher, sage or savant in the world whose private and political occupations, utterances and writings are daily reported in detail to the Press? Is there a political party which controls nearly the entire Press of a sub-continent as the Congress does in India? Mr. Gandhi has taken full advantage of it and continually expresses his views and criticism about communal questions in terms which are often as subtle as they are provocative. Why has Mr. Gandhi indefinitely prolonged his stay in Noakhali and has adopted a comical walking tour of at the most two or three miles a day is a question which is not easy to answer."<sup>34</sup>

As soon as the disturbances ceased and the refugees were safe in the camps, the Muslims acting under the influence of the League, it was alleged, sometimes instituted cases against the very people who



had saved them. Congressmen, after they had recovered their bearings, did some splendid work. The quick suppression of the riot was considerably due to their efforts. They were also responsible for saving thousands of Muslims sometimes even at the risk of their own lives. But the campaign of calumny by the League, against the Congress and the Hindus, the insults to Congress leaders and Congress volunteers in the camps by the League volunteers, the overbearing attitude of the Muslim volunteers, who were able successfully to infect the refugees under their charge with some of their rudeness, and the general atmosphere of communal hatred which prevailed in the camps, had soured the hearts of a section of the Congressmen and made them indifferent to the fate of the Muslims. Many of them began to ask whether the Government was not being too lenient. And so when they met Gandhiji in the beginning of March, 1947, it was in a self-righteous mood.

The Hindu masses were still in the bulk unrepentant. They were bullying in the villages while apprehensive of Muslim concentration in the towns. Many of their breadwinners were in jail. The Congress had condemned what they had done. They were consequently in a sullen mood. Stolen property was not returned. Unseemly remarks were sometimes flung by irresponsible youngsters when Muslims passed by. Economic boycott of the Muslim had come into operation at places. Their crops were cut and carried away. Even the door leaves etc. from the deserted houses were removed. Stray incidents of harassment continued. The general attitude of the Hindu public was one of indifference to such incidents.

The Muslim masses were still in the grip of fear and its concomitant hatred, full of mistrust of the Government, the Congress and the Hindu community in general. For much of this fear and mistrust the hothouse conditions created in the camps, whose psychology was controlled by League volunteers, were responsible.

The scene to which Gandhiji came was thus chaotic and full of violence. He had to lead people to introspection and self-examination; to turn hardened hearts to genuine repentance; to steady friends and win over foes even against what they mistook for their self-interest; to put heart into those who had been shaken by their sufferings and to bring love where hatred and cunning ruled; and finally, to call a mighty organisation that had forgotten itself, back to the path of duty, and thereby steady the foundations of democracy shaking at its very inception. His non-violence was called to the supreme test. Bihar became another outpost in his "do or die" mission.



## CHAPTER XIV

### 'REBUILD WHAT YOU HAVE DESTROYED'

#### 1

ON THE 12th March, 1947, Gandhiji set out for the interior to carry his voice directly to the people in the villages and, as he put it, to "read in the face of the countryside" the mystery of what had happened.

The first village to be visited was Kumarhar, a village three miles from Patna Junction railway station. Gandhiji was deeply moved when an old man with a flowing white beard led him through the ruins and showed him the damage done to his house and the houses of his relatives. Even the library and the mosque had not been spared. Desecrating places of worship always pained Gandhiji deeply and he used some very strong words to give expression to his feeling in his post-prayer speech at evening. They could not put forward the plea, he said, that the Muslims had desecrated Hindu temples. Did it in anyway help to protect the temple or serve the cause of Hinduism? Personally he was as much an idol-worshipper as an idol-breaker, remarked Gandhiji, and he put it to his audience that the same held good in respect of them—Hindus and non-Hindus alike—whether they admitted it or not. Mankind thirsted for symbols. Were not mosques and churches in reality the same as temples? God resided everywhere. But men associated sacredness with particular places and things more than with others. Such sentiment was worthy of respect when it did not mean restrictions on similar freedom for others. For himself, he said, he would hug an idol and lay down his life to protect it rather than brook any restriction upon his freedom of worship. He had come to help them to realise the extent of the madness to which they had stooped. The ruined houses of the Muslims, which he had visited that day, had almost brought tears to his eyes but he had steeled his heart. Bihar, over which the Buddha roamed and taught, was surely capable once more of rising to the heights from which it could radiate its effulgence over the rest of India. Only unadulterated non-violence could raise it to that status.

The departure from the straight path of non-violence which they had allowed themselves during the 1942 movement, he went on to say, was very probably responsible for their recent aberration. He gave instances of the spirit of general lawlessness which had seized them. They travelled without tickets, they pulled chains in railway trains unlawfully or in senseless vindictiveness, burnt zamindars' crops or belongings,



and so on. The best way to bring about reform in the economic and social systems was through the royal road of self-suffering. Any departure from it would result only in changing the form of evil without eradicating it.

The next day Gandhiji visited the ruined village of Parsa. On the way, at the village of Sipara, his car was stopped by the villagers who presented him with a purse. On opening it Gandhiji found among the coins the following repentance letter signed by the villagers of Sipara:

Please forgive us our great sin. We feel ashamed for the loss of life and property which our Muslim brethren have suffered at our hands. As a token of repentance and expiation for our sin, we present you this purse for the relief of the Muslim victims of the disturbances. We again beg your pardon and assure you that such a thing will never happen again.

In the course of his prayer address at Abdullah Chak that evening, Gandhiji remarked that he wanted every Indian to feel that he had a share in every evil deed committed anywhere in India, no matter by whom and against whom, and upon all lay the burden of undoing it.

There were only two ways before the country, Gandhiji remarked at Khusrupur, the next place to be visited—the way of returning blow for blow and that of unadulterated non-violence. Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 was an education in the latter. But recent Bihar happenings had forced him to the conclusion that their non-violence was the non-violence of the weak. In the crisis that lay ahead, such non-violence would be found to be of no avail. Only non-violence of the strong could prove effective. If the way of non-violence of the strong appealed to their head and heart, as a first step towards it they should come forward and do reparation for the injury done to their Muslim brethren as a token of their sincere repentance. If, on the other hand, they did not honestly believe in it and imagined that the way of violence was the proper answer to the challenge of the times, they should say so frankly and truthfully. “I would not be hurt by the truth but I would prefer not to live and see the failure of the method of non-violence. It does not matter to me where I lay down my life in the pursuit of my cherished dream. Anywhere in India is the same to me. In the example which Bihar might set lies the future of our unhappy land.”

Some members of the Muslim League Relief Committee, Phulwari Sharif, waited upon Gandhiji on the 15th March and asked him several questions on behalf of the refugees. Gandhiji’s answers showed that on many questions on which he had hesitated to offer an opinion before he visited the countryside, his mind was now made up.

“In the present unsettled conditions would you advise the Muslims to go back and settle in their villages?” he was asked.

Gandhiji answered: “If you have courage and the requisite faith in God, I would ask you to go back. I confess, if similar things had



happened to me, perhaps I would not have been able to go back myself. The thought of the dead would have haunted me. My ambition, however, is to be able with confidence in God, to remain even in the midst of those who may have become my deadly enemies."

As regards "pockets" his view was that if Muslims of the villages, where they were in large numbers, welcomed them in their midst and they also wanted to go there, nobody could prevent them from doing that. Similarly, nobody could prevent the refugees from leaving the Province for good if they wished.

With regard to those responsible for acts of barbarity, his view again was that they should receive condign punishment. The Government of Bihar had not abjured punishment. "A Government which believes in the punishment of crime and yet does not punish known criminals is not fit to be called a Government at all."

Another question was, what should the attitude of the Bihar Government be in regard to any private organisation that had made arrangements for the care of orphans and widows? The responsibility for the care of widows and orphans, Gandhiji replied, was no doubt Government's. If any organisation wanted to work in its own way, it was free to do so but then it could not expect Government aid. "The responsibility should be discharged by the Government or in a manner it approves of."

"How will it be possible to make good the historical, cultural, social and religious losses which the majority community in its madness has caused to the minority?"

"Such losses cannot be made good. Such acts of barbarity will continue to be committed till we become tolerant enough to understand that all religions lead to God. Till that change comes about, it is impossible to prevent such barbarity and the irreparable losses resulting from it."

"What treatment should be meted out to officers who openly sided with the rioters or were otherwise guilty of partiality?"

"There can be no place in Government for officers against whom such charges can be proved."

The last question was: "What steps do you propose to take to prevent the recurrence of a tragedy like the recent one?"

Gandhiji replied: "I shall ask the Ministers to frame laws so as to lay the responsibility for the safety of the Muslims in a particular locality on the Hindus of that locality, where the former happen to be few. What is, however, needed is a reunion of hearts. To the Muslims I would say, as I told the Hindus of Noakhali, 'You should shed all fear except that of God.'"

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On the afternoon of 15th March Gandhiji paid a courtesy call to the Governor, Sir Hugh Dow. His impression of the talk was that the Governor considered the attitude of the Ministers to be dilatory; that



the permanent officials had interpreted that to mean that the Ministers did not want them to be prompt in taking energetic action; that the guilty ones had not been properly dealt with; and that the League's demands were turned down not on their merits but because they were the League's demands. Gandhiji felt that it was his duty to bring this to the notice of the Ministers. This he did the next day.

*Gandhiji to the Governor*

17th March, 1947

The Ministers present totally refuted all these imputations and the Chief Minister expressed considerable surprise. The Chief Minister said that he and his colleagues had often differed from you on several questions including the minorities. He added however that on behalf of himself and his colleagues he had given you the assurance that in their handling of the minority question, they would readily accept your advice even though there were differences between you and them.

The Governor's reply was worth noting. He was of the view that from the very beginning, after the riots, the Ministers should have declared their intention to compensate those who had suffered damage during the riots. Had it been done immediately, a good deal of the organised hostility against the Ministry's measures would not have arisen. As it was, it was only after considerable delay that an announcement was made. At the same time, the Governor quite realised the difficulties that the Chief Minister felt about making "a commitment of unknown financial liability".<sup>1</sup>

It was true, proceeded the Governor, that some officials drew from this the inference that the Ministry did not regard the matter as urgent. When he visited Chapra in the middle of January, 1947, he found that no money or materials had actually been distributed, although the riots had taken place at the end of October, and the debris lay just as the rioters had left it. He had communicated to the Chief Minister his impressions on his return, and he was glad to say that the Chief Minister took the necessary steps at once by impressing on district officers that rehabilitation was the most urgent work before them. "I certainly did not intend to convey to you that the Ministry themselves were in any way half-hearted about it. But for some months, in my opinion, this view was held by many subordinate officials, because of the original delay in getting off the mark."

In regard to the punishment of the guilty ones, the Governor protested that he actually held views rather the reverse of what Gandhiji had thought. "I do not think it would be possible to punish, judicially, any but a tiny fraction of the culprits. A lot of time of police and the magistrates, that might be better spent, is likely to be entirely wasted in that attempt." He felt that the only way in which this matter could have been effectively dealt with was "by the imposition of collective fines".



Nor did he think that the Ministry had turned down the League's demands merely because they were League demands. "But I think that the Hindu public of Bihar was, and perhaps is, averse from treating Muslim refugees more generously than they think Hindu refugees are treated in Bengal, and in the beginning there was a tendency to wait and see."

On the question of the Muslim demand for "pockets", the Governor's position was the same as Gandhiji's. "What we should have done was to have been prepared to consider such proposals on their merits, and to place on the Muslims themselves the responsibility for suggesting definite schemes and carrying them out if they were sanctioned. I have discussed this with the Chief Minister who is aware of my views and I think not hostile to them. When we have paid compensation to a sufferer, it should be left to him to decide where and how he will spend it, just as it would be if he had drawn his compensation from an insurance company."

The Governor confirmed that in regard to the minorities in general, differences between him and his Ministers had never gone to a stage when they were not resolved by friendly discussion:

In this particular matter of the recent disturbances, I have never had occasion to think of exercising any special powers in opposition to Ministerial advice. The question of restoring confidence between the two great communities is one of extraordinary difficulty, and I should not like you to get the impression that there has been any lack of cooperation between me and the Ministers on this subject.

Very cordial relations sprang up between the Governor and Gandhiji. The Governor offered him the use of his private garden: "It is large and quiet, and you may sometimes, in early morning or evening, like to have a quiet walk or rest in it, away from the crowds that throng you."<sup>2</sup> And again: "I hope we shall be able to have a further talk soon after you return to Patna, and I shall be grateful for any advice you can give. May I say that, as far as I am able to judge, your visit to the Province has been, and is being, of great help in creating a better spirit between the communities. You must have realised how much still remains to be done."<sup>3</sup> There was more than diplomatic politeness in this exchange of courtesies.

Gandhiji referred to his visit to the Governor in his prayer speech the same evening. He could not go to the Governors of Provinces, he said, asking for or expecting favours or services as of yore. Under a responsible Government, which theirs was supposed to be, services and favours he could expect only from the Ministers who were the representatives of the people. The Governor had undoubtedly powers with reference to the minorities but these were meant to be exercised only with great restraint. Gandhiji took the opportunity, too, to disabuse



the people's mind of the notion that they had to "seize" power from the British. Non-violent non-cooperation did not admit of any "seizure" of power. The British had naturally and voluntarily divested themselves of much of their authority and power. It was now up to the people of India to do their duty in terms of non-violence, if they were to have complete control *over and for the masses*. The late events in Bihar were a deviation from that path.

As a result of his experience during the three short visits which he had paid to the neighbouring villages, Gandhiji came to the conclusion that things had so far settled down that the refugees could now safely go back to their original homes, if they could overcome the horror of what had happened. The villagers had swarmed to hear him and listened to his severe castigation and exhortations to repentance with rapt attention. The healthy competition among the people in rags in contributing their coppers to the fund for the relief of the riot-affected Muslims was in itself a reassuring sign. Perhaps, his uncanny eye detected, too, something in the face of the countryside which emboldened him to reassure the Muslim sufferers, who had come to see him in the course of the day, that a repetition of the recent tragedy was impossible in Bihar. He narrated how he had told a well-to-do merchant that he should not be afraid of restarting his business in full confidence for he was sure the Bihar Hindus would honour their pledge.

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Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan had been prevailed upon by Congressmen as well as non-Congressmen to visit Bihar, after the Bihar tragedy. There is nothing more dramatic in recent history than the conversion of this dour Pathan Chieftain to the doctrine of non-violence and the rise of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement in pursuance of that ideal under his leadership, among a people reputed to be the most warlike in the world, with "lawlessness of centuries" running in their blood.<sup>4</sup> He became a tower of strength to all in Bihar, standing four-square to every storm. His rock-like firmness and unwavering faith in non-violence and human nature shone like a beacon in the tempestuous darkness of the night.

He did not mince words. Such was the respect in which he was held by all, by virtue of his selfless service, sincerity and moral fervour that he could speak with authority to Hindus and Muslims alike. The Bihar Ministers listened with respect to his straight-from-the-shoulder talk; he had fully earned the right. Never for a moment did his faith falter. Above the pandemonium of insanity, his voice rose calm and clear.

"India today seems an inferno of madness and my heart weeps to see our homes set on fire by ourselves," he remarked at a joint gathering of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, held in Gurudwara Har Mandir, the birth place of the Sikh Guru Govind Singh, in Patna City. "I find today darkness reigning over India and my eyes vainly turn from one



direction to another to see light." He was fed up with power politics, he said, and was deeply pained at the hatred which he saw being preached all over India. As a "servant of God" he was eager only to be able to serve suffering humanity. At the close of the meeting, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims accompanied him to a mosque, adjacent to the Gurudwara, exchanged greetings and embraced one another.

"The sincerity of the man which shows so transparently in every word he says," reported a Press correspondent, "has left a deep impression on his audiences. There was nothing new in what he said. . . . Nevertheless, the few simple words coming from a heavy heart struck an answering chord in many of his hearers. The scenes of fraternisation which marked one of the Frontier Gandhi's meetings and the coming together of all communities in places of worship are reminiscent of the Khilafat days."

India was inhabited by "one single nation—Hindus and Muslims included", he remarked at another meeting. There were Provinces where Hindus were in an insignificant minority. There were some other Provinces where Muslims were similarly situated. If what had happened in Bihar and Noakhali was repeated in other places, the fate of the nation was surely sealed. The Provincial Governments under the popular Ministers had not shown themselves to be strong enough to prevent major communal troubles from breaking out. He reminded the Muslim League that Islam was the most tolerant religion in the world. "If we are to be true Muslims, we should . . . do our utmost to spread toleration amongst our brethren. . . . Today . . . other communities are far more tolerant. We should rectify this fault in ourselves . . . to become true Muslims."

He was somewhere in the interior when Gandhiji arrived in Patna. In a letter to Gandhiji he wrote: "You are right. Our Ahimsa is on test. When I see the politicians surrounding us wrongly using the name of God and religion to propagate hatred, I begin to hate politics." Immediately on learning about his whereabouts Gandhiji wired him to come. From that time onward he became his constant, silent companion, opening his lips only when Gandhiji wanted him to.

On the 16th March, Gandhiji's weekly silence having begun, he requested Badshah Khan to address the prayer meeting. In deep anguish, Badshah Khan confessed that he found himself surrounded by darkness, which increased the more the more he thought of the future of India. He could see no light in spite of his best efforts. India was on fire. It was for Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians to realise that if India was burnt down all of them would be the losers. He was a Khudai Khidmatgar (a servant of God). As such and as a true Muslim he could not hang back when a chance to serve others offered itself, and so he was in their midst. Their responsibility had greatly increased especially after the British declaration that they would quit India in fifteen



months. They must remember that what could be achieved through love could never be achieved through hatred or force. The example of Europe was before them as a warning. Addressing the Muslim Leaguers in general, he added that what he was saying to them was for their good only. They wanted Pakistan; they could have it only through love and willing consent. Pakistan established through force would prove a doubtful boon. He ended with a fervid appeal to the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to try to quench the fire which had engulfed India from Bengal to Bihar, and from Bihar to the Punjab and the Frontier. They should think in terms of the good of India and its inhabitants as a whole.

## 2

With Masaurhi Gandhiji entered into deeper waters. It was the site of one of the most gruesome tragedies of the disturbances. Whole villages had been wiped out. Almost every house had been razed to the ground. And yet here, as elsewhere in Bihar, the Hindus and Muslims were once friends. Most of the institutions such as the local co-operative bank, the high-school, and even the temple and the mosque were established and built by the joint efforts of Hindus and Muslims.

Suspicion had been created in the minds of the local Hindu population that the Muslims were secretly organising and arming themselves on a mass scale. Concentration of Muslims after reports of incidents in other places further strengthened that suspicion. Fear expresses itself up to a stage in self-assertion. On the night of 30th October, 1946, cries of Allah-o-Akbar rent the sky from Muslim quarters. They sent the local Hindus running pell-mell in a panic out of their homes. At this the siren of the mill, whose owner and senior employees were alleged to have Hindu Mahasabha sympathies and were strongly suspected of having organised the attack on the Muslims, was blown and Hindus in their thousands with cries of *Mahabir Swamiki Jai* collected from the surrounding villages. The Muslims quieted down. Through the efforts of some Congressmen—the complicity of some others was strongly suspected—the mob was turned back. The next morning, the promised help from Patna did not arrive. The Muslims started fleeing to the railway station to catch the train to Patna. In the afternoon suddenly the rumour went round that trouble had started at the station and some Hindus had been injured. Simultaneously, the mill siren blew and the Muslims, who were waiting to be carried away by the 3 p.m. train, were attacked by a large Hindu mob and butchered in cold-blood. The engine-driver of a goods train, which was standing by, with great presence of mind, detached the engine from the train and brought armed forces to the scene. It was 4 p. m. Some Muslims had taken shelter in the booking office. The mob set fire to it. The arrival of armed force, however, saved their lives.



On the morning of 1st November, a mob attacked Malkana, one of the Mohallas of Masaurhi. Muslims had collected on the roof of one of their houses. One of them fired two rounds. One Hindu was reported to be killed. The news spread like wildfire. The mill siren was blown and a mob said to be nearly 20,000 strong launched an attack. The presence of the military forced them back. But while dispersing they attacked Rahmatganj, Purana bazar and Masaurhi bazar, looted shops, burnt houses and killed some Muslims. At 2 p.m. a special train arrived and all the Muslims from Malkana were evacuated. On the eve of Gandhiji's visit, only 25 Muslims were staying in Masaurhi proper out of about 1,000 before the riot. The Hindus generally were reported to be in a sullen mood, one of the reasons being that many innocent Hindus were said to have been implicated in riot cases.

This was the setting in which Gandhiji addressed his first prayer meeting at Masaurhi on the evening of the 17th March. From thirty to forty thousand men and women were present. The verses from the Koran were listened to amid pin-drop silence. Could they be the same people who had indulged in all those acts of madness?

In a report that had been handed to him, Gandhiji remarked in the course of his prayer address, it had been stated that the initial aggression at Masaurhi had come from the Muslims. He was not concerned as to how the trouble actually started. What he was concerned to know was how the Hindus, who were in such overwhelming majority, could stoop so low as to indulge in the murder of innocents. The Muslims had also complained, that the Government was indifferent to the wrongs suffered by them. But, said Gandhiji, he was not there to adjudicate; his was not the way of a prosecutor or a judge. His was the humble role of a reformer and humanitarian. He had come to invite offenders to repentance for their folly. The Government had already declared that they would appoint an impartial commission to go into the causes of the terrible disturbances and discover ways and means of avoiding a repetition of the same. The commission would also advise what reparation should be made to the sufferers. Those who had complaints should place their evidence before the commission.

After the prayer address, Gandhiji stayed on to collect money for the Muslim relief fund. There was a stampede as everybody pushed forward to be the first to put his or her copper into the Mahatma's hands. As he bent forward with outstretched hands to receive the contributions, he read in those faces, a quiver with emotion, the unmistakable evidence that repentance had at last crept into their hearts.

On the following day Gandhiji visited the ruined houses of Masaurhi proper. It was an ordeal to pass through the clouds of dust raised by the huge crowds that always besieged him wherever he went and by whatever route he passed. It was the month of March. So it was beginning to be warm, too. In Noakhali the crowds were small and the velvety soil



raised no dust, for the soft dews laid it during the morning hours, when the march was in progress. The tall coconut and betel-nut trees, the dense thickets of the bamboo with dark green leaves and beautifully ringed stems, sometimes running almost horizontally above the tangle brush-wood, the stately palms, the still, soft air and the variegated flowers in full bloom—one missed all these and the dust and glare were relieved only by the huge mango groves which dot the countryside of Bihar. These mango groves had at many places become the grave-yards of many an uncovered corpse in those unfortunate days of October and November. Gandhiji seemed to be unaware of the dust, unaware of the mango groves, unaware of the deeply devoted crowd; he seemed conscious only of the tragedy of which they had been the silent witnesses and which cried out for repentance. He gave vent to his feeling in his post-prayer speech in the evening. With deep emotion he described the wreckage that he had witnessed, and assured his Muslim brethren that if such a misfortune again took place in Bihar, he would be the first to perish in the flames. His prayer to God was that He would not keep him alive to witness such an awful disgrace.

While he was proceeding to the prayer meeting that evening, two letters were put into his hand. One of them ran:

We of Sain are . . . extremely sorry for what has happened. Here, however, we Hindus and Muslims, lived like brothers despite the prevailing lawlessness and we are happy and proud to tell you that we are living as brothers even today. We seek your blessings that we may continue to live in love and affection.

The letter was accompanied by a small purse for the relief of the sufferers. The other letter was from the inhabitants of Barni:

When the riot was going on all around, we formed a peace committee and did not let the disturbances penetrate our area. There was absolutely no difference here between Hindus and Muslims. We are working on the same lines even today, and we assure you that we will always continue to live like brothers.

What especially impressed Gandhiji was that not only had those people kept themselves untouched by the prevailing madness but were deeply sorry for what others had done. How often had he said that the fault of one was the fault of all!

On the 18th March, Gandhiji had a meeting with the refugees at Masaurhi. The discussion showed that the suicidal remedies which the Muslim League had been advocating had at least for the time taken possession of the Muslim mind. The remedies of the League were based on the fundamental assumption, as a Leaguer put it, that Hindus could never be the friends of the Muslims. Gandhiji based his remedies on the bedrock assumption of underlying unity and affection of those who were once like brothers and might be so again. The fundamental



unity might be disturbed but could not be destroyed. His attempt was to re-establish what once was and could again be.

But it was going to be no plain sailing for Gandhiji. There were rocks ahead. A meeting that he had with the local Congressmen at Bir on 19th March, served powerfully to remind him of it.

The room was full to capacity. Shah Uzair Munimi, the Muslim District Congress President, had finished his description of the devastation in Patna district. Gandhiji asked if they had thought what was to be done next. Shah Uzair replied that if they could get even a few honest men, everything could be set right. That gave Gandhiji his cue. He gave to the Congressmen assembled there a most vigorous shaking. He asked them if it was true that quite a large number of Congressmen had taken part in the disturbances? If so, how many of the 132 members of their committee were involved? It would be a great thing if it could be said that none of them was concerned with it. But he knew that it could not be so said. He wanted to ask them a simple question: How could they live to see a woman of 100 years butchered, as alleged, before their very eyes? He had vowed to "do or die" in Bihar. He would not rest nor let others rest; he would wander all over and ask the skeletons lying about how all that had happened. There was such a fire raging in him, he said, that he would know no peace till he had found the reply to the challenge that the recent happenings had flung in their face.

He recalled how a similar restlessness had seized him at the time of Noakhali. The fire in him would not let him rest, and so he had started walking barefoot from village to village. It seemed to him, he said, that in Bihar, too, he might have to undergo the same ordeal. With deep passion he declared that if he found that his comrades were deceiving him, it would so madden him that he would throw away the soft mattressed seat which they had offered him, and walk barefooted on and on and on, as he had vowed to do in Noakhali, till his mission was fulfilled or he was dead. After all, it was in Bihar that he had renounced similar comforts before. He owed that much to Bihar. For it was Bihar that had made him when he made Bihar.

Nostalgically he recalled his first Satyagraha struggle in India in Champaran in 1917; how Rajendra Babu, Brajkishore Babu, Dharni Babu, Gorakh Babu and other leaders of Bihar renounced lucrative careers and a life of comfort and ease to turn themselves into humble servants of humanity, messing in a common kitchen, washing their own clothes and dishes and performing other humble, dull, drab chores, as a symbol of their conversion, instead of getting them done by servants. The success of Champaran was the result of Bihar's penance. Would they rise to the occasion and revive the tradition of Champaran once again?

He confessed he had his misgivings. He begged of them, unless they could cooperate with him truthfully, to leave him alone. But they should realise that even if they left him he would not leave them or Bihar. He



had dug himself in in Bihar. He would work for Noakhali and the whole of India from there. The non-violent fight which he had launched against injustice and oppression in Champaran had sent new life pulsating throughout India. History would repeat itself if Biharis played their part. He knew the work in Bihar this time was far more difficult than before. The point at issue was whether Hinduism and Islam could live side by side. Many people thought that they could not. He, on the other hand, felt sure that they had all to live together and as equals.

As Gandhiji sank back into his seat, one of the Congressmen rose to say that it was not the people who had degenerated, it was Congressmen who had gone down. How could the Congress be pulled out of the morass?

Gandhiji admitted that it was comparatively easy to fight the British but difficult to conquer one's own weaknesses. The Hindus held the key in their hands in Bihar. It was up to them to relieve the police of their burden by guaranteeing with their own lives the protection and safety of Muslims, who were their trust. Congressmen, as the people's representatives, were responsible for the peace in their area. They should achieve it or die in the attempt.

The meeting dispersed. Gandhiji was visibly agitated. In a low, impassioned voice he shared his anguish with Badshah Khan, who sat listening with a grave face. Soon Badshah Khan also left and only one of Gandhiji's secretaries remained in the room. Sadly Gandhiji turned to him and remarked: "You see where I stand!"

Later in the day, Gandhiji met representatives of fifteen to twenty circles. They told him that after consultation, they had appointed a committee of 11 members who took upon themselves the responsibility for improving conditions of the refugees and riot victims in those circles. They also decided to form a volunteer corps and a *panchayat*. Gandhiji warned them against infiltration of bad elements into their ranks. They should use the system of secret ballot. Those who had taken part in the riot or were suspected of having done so, should not stand for or be put on the *panchayat*. Success would depend upon organised public opinion asserting itself. Government by itself would not be able to do much.

On his way to the prayer ground that evening, Gandhiji visited Andari and Gorraiakhari, two villages in Masaurhi area. Andari had a population of 462 Hindus and 168 Muslims before the riot. Muslims from the surrounding villages congregated in Andari on 30th October, 1946. When the news about the massacre in Gorraiakhari reached the village, they were advised by the military to evacuate. But they were confident that with a gun and a pistol at their disposal they could ward off any attack. When a mob attacked Andari on 2nd November, 1946, the three constables present on duty fired killing seven persons, but later retired (so said the Government report) in view of the size of the



onrushing mob. The Muslims naturally suspected treachery. Getting on to the roofs of their houses, they started defending themselves with the courage of despair. Some of them put on green turbans, the symbol of *jehad*, and some, it was stated, even killed their women folk with their own hands to prevent their falling into the hands of the mob. But the ammunition ran short. Thereupon the mob maddened by the death of seven of its own members came like an onrushing tide and in their mad fury swept before them the handful of defenders. When Gandhiji visited the village, not a single Muslim was there. The Government action, according to Government report, was: "(a) number of cases instituted — 1; (b) of the 29 accused, one was arrested and another surrendered in court, processes were issued against others; (c) 13 persons in the area were detained under the Bihar Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance, 1946." And this in mid-March, four months after the disturbances!

The only relieving feature of the grim tragedy was that no place of worship was damaged. A person who had taken part in the riot had voluntarily surrendered. Gandhiji also received a repentance letter: Revered Bapu,

At your sacred feet, we of Andari and the surrounding villages declare with God as witness that we are extremely sorry for what has happened. The occasion which has brought you here and which has caused you so much pain is a matter of shame for us. We swear before you that we of Andari and the surrounding villages will henceforth regard the Muslims as our blood-brothers, as we used to before the unfortunate occurrence. For the sin we have committed we beg your and God's pardon.

People of Andari and surrounding villages.

The letter was signed by sixty people.

The sight at Gorraiakhari would have shaken anybody. Situated on an elevation overlooking green fields below, it must have been a lovely little village. It had a population of 400 Muslims and 20 Hindus. Even the Government report said that out of this 119 Muslims had been killed, 11 injured and 12 were missing. The houses were all in ruins, and spoke of the vandalism of the riotous mob. The village was completely deserted. It was almost impossible to get into any of the houses as the entrances were all blocked by debris. The atmosphere bore the stench of decaying bodies. Gandhiji moved through the lanes of the dead with a heavy heart. He referred to it laconically next day at Masaurhi in a few sentences which concealed more than they revealed what was passing within him. But at Gorraiakhari that evening he was too full even for that. Instead, he utilised the time before the prayer collecting funds for the Muslim sufferers from the congregation as a mark of penance for the great sin.

Grief becomes a luxury when atonement calls for appropriate deeds.



In his post-prayer address, Gandhiji asked the audience to learn the Urdu language and script besides Hindi as a mark of true penance, if for nothing else. The increased contact with the Muslims resulting from it would be a concrete and fitting expression of sympathy. He further asked the audience to try their best to get the destroyed villages in their neighbourhood rehabilitated. They should beg the Muslims to forget the past and entreat them, with full guarantee of safety and protection, to come back; the volunteers should become true servants of God and those who were guilty should unreservedly confess their crimes and do appropriate penance.

After two days' stay at Bir, from where he visited a number of surrounding villages, Gandhiji returned to Masaurhi on 20th March. He had seen such wreckage, he remarked in his post-prayer speech, as he dared not try to describe for fear of bursting into tears. Anybody could go and see it for himself. It was a sad commentary on them that even months after the carnage the debris had not yet been removed and belongings were being stolen everyday from the deserted Muslim houses. It was their duty to rebuild what they had destroyed. They had committed the crime and it was for them to do the penance. Every Hindu should take part in compensating the Muslim losses; and those who were ready should give him their names so that volunteer corps might be organised for the purpose for different localities. They should build such beautiful houses in the place of those destroyed that an observer should not even suspect that anything had happened there. If they did their part, the Muslims would forget the past and return to their homes and its fragrance would spread throughout India.

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While Gandhiji was thus preoccupied, disquieting news began to come in from the Punjab and Noakhali. Following upon Mr. Attlee's declaration of 20th February, 1947, the Muslim League had launched an all-out effort to capture power in the Punjab and in pursuance of that aim had launched a "Direct Action" campaign. (See Chapter I, Vol. III). The Hindus on their part had decided to observe a "Punjab Day" in Bihar as a protest. A similar report about a proposal by the League to observe a "Pakistan Day" had come from Noakhali. As a result, the Hindus were feeling nervous. Gandhiji appealed to both sides to give up the idea. The Bengal Chief Minister had asked him to visit Bihar. If, therefore, he wanted him to carry on his work in Bihar uninterrupted, Gandhiji said, he should ban the proposed observance of Pakistan Day in Noakhali. That did not mean that the Muslims should give up the demand for Pakistan. He only wanted them to strive for Pakistan by convincing others of its merits. Similarly, if they wanted to observe "Pakistan Day", they should do so after allaying the fears of the minority.

The next day, the 21st March, Gandhiji shifted his camp to village



Hasadiha, where he met Muslim refugees from several surrounding villages. There was a meeting with the village representatives in the afternoon. They told him that people felt that only when looted property of the Hindus in Noakhali was returned, could the Muslim looted property be returned in Bihar. Gandhiji was further told that withdrawal of cases against the accused was necessary for the reunion of hearts. Again, it was Noakhali in the reverse. It burnt Gandhiji through and through. Did they mean to say, he asked, that if Muslims turned goondas, Hindus also should do so? Shameful things had happened in Noakhali but the way they were said to have butchered children and even old women in Bihar, and the scale on which they had done it, had far eclipsed Noakhali. Why could they not leave the Punjab to take care of itself? It was enough if they set their own house in order. Had Indian humanity sunk so low? Did they want to reduce religion to a competition in bestiality? They should understand that so far as he was concerned, any harm done to a Muslim was like harm done to himself. He had come there to reunite those that had been torn asunder, or die in the attempt.

The evening prayer was held at Ghorhuan, a small village with a population of 200 Hindus and 80 Muslims. Fresh sights of destruction where men, women and children had been brutally done to death once more shook Gandhiji deeply. He asked those assembled before him at the prayer meeting to sit in solemn silence in mourning over the victims. People went to bathe in the Ganges, he remarked, believing that it would wash off their sin. The ruins before them were a reminder of the sin they had committed against helpless women and children. If those who were guilty, or their relations, went to the victims with a truly penitent heart and reassured them that what was past was past and would never happen again, and successfully persuaded them to return to their home, it might provide a partial atonement for their great sin.

He paid a glowing tribute to those brave men and women, who had risked the wrath of the violent mobs to save Muslim lives and Muslim property during the mad upheaval. He congratulated them though he knew they did not want any congratulations. About fifty persons, who were wanted in connection with the riot cases, had surrendered on the day after his arrival at Masaurhi. Gandhiji hoped that many others, who had taken part in the riot, would follow, make a clean breast of what they had done, and take whatever punishment might be meted out to them. If they had not the courage to surrender to the authorities, they could come to him or to his colleagues and confess.

While returning to Patna next morning, Gandhiji met a batch of Muslim women refugees at village Pipalwan. Always sensitive to the sufferings of the weak and the oppressed, he was greatly moved by their tales of woe. Many of them had lost their husbands, children and dear ones. He told them that although, in view of what had happened,



their suspicion against the Hindus was understandable, still if the Hindus showed true repentance, not merely by words but by appropriate deeds, they should go back at least where there had been no murders. But whether they chose to return or to stay away, they should not bear an ill-will against the evil doers, nor seek revenge. That would be true bravery.

Summing up his impressions of his six days' tour of the affected area in Masaurhi at the evening prayer gathering at Patna on 22nd March, Gandhiji observed that while the vestiges of terrible happenings which he had seen were such as to make a man almost despair of humanity, he had also seen unmistakable signs of the dawn of a new era. The villagers were not only genuinely penitent over what had happened but were also willing to atone for the past in any manner he might suggest. They had contributed their humble mite liberally for the relief of the Muslims. Again and again they had stopped his car on the way to present him with purses. They had addressed him letters expressing their readiness and willingness to help in the rehabilitation of the Muslims. In a number of places Muslims themselves had come and told him that absence of incidents in those places was due to the bravery of the local Hindus. Many who were wanted in connection with the riots had come and surrendered to the authorities. He hoped many more would come forward and acknowledge their guilt. Confession of their guilt would not only evoke respect for their courage but would ultimately enhance the prestige of the Province as a whole.

The next day Gandhiji met a member of the Muslim League Working Committee who told him that his coming to Bihar had inspired confidence in the Muslims. But the whole body-politic of India was in a desperate strait. No sooner was the symptom allayed in one place, than the disease broke out in a more virulent form in another. Sardar Patel had written to Gandhiji that a sort of peace seemed to have been established in the Punjab through military measures. Gandhiji saw no peace in that stillness of the grave. His penetrating eyes saw beneath and beyond the superficial and the immediate. The Sepoy Rising of 1857 was quelled by means of superior arms. Outwardly, things had quieted down but the hatred against the imposed rule had gone deep underground with the result that the British were still reaping the harvest of what was then sown. If the Punjab was quieted down by the use of superior force, the seed of further quarrel and bitterness between the Hindus and Muslims would be sown for all time. From the information that had reached him, the people in the Punjab were silently preparing for an open and deadlier fights. Weapons were being collected. If that went on, it was clear to him as daylight, he warned prophetically, *that after a certain stage even the military would find it impossible to control the situation.* True peace would come only when at least one side, if not both, adopted the true bravery that is non-violence. His reading of the situation was



that Bihar had realised that there was no bravery in killing women and children; it was sheer cowardice. It would be a great thing if Bihar could manifest the true bravery of silent strength, and show thereby the way to India and the world.



## CHAPTER XV

### THE BITTER DREGS

#### 1

THERE WAS a huge crowd waiting at Jehanabad railway station when Gandhiji arrived there on the 26th March, 1947. Gandhiji and party were driven from the station to the inspection bungalow, where arrangements for their stay had been made. But crowds blocked the road. The compound of the bungalow itself was packed to capacity. It was with difficulty that way could be cleared for the car to get in.

Of the three sub-divisions affected in Gaya district, Jehanabad was the worst. Two gangs working under two local gang leaders were largely responsible for the worst crimes. They were joined at various places by the local riff-raff. In the onward march of destruction many kept joining in and dropping out, when they felt they had enough or as much as they could carry. Due to secret sympathy with the rioters on the part of the people in general and lack of organisation, the saner section of the public could not offer any resistance worth the name. But comparatively unknown Congress workers provided shining exceptions. Time and again they saved the lives of Muslims at the risk of their own. One such was Sakal Babu, a local head-master. With his students and some other workers he personally patrolled day and night the villages of Daulatpur, Nagama and Rasalpur until the entire Muslim population had been evacuated to Jehanabad. Nine months after the disturbances, the Hindus of Daulatpur, inspired by his example, were still guarding the Muslim houses. A Muslim remarked to a member of Gandhiji's party touchingly that even a radish that he had left behind had dried undisturbed in its place.

After a little rest, the party started for Kako relief camp. There were 500 refugees residing in Kako at the time of Gandhiji's visit. Men and women in rags had collected in the compound and in the small verandah of the building where the refugees were housed. They burst into tears as they saw him. Gandhiji sat on a bare bench that had been placed there for him by the refugees. He consoled them. To break under one's sorrow did not become brave men. Some of them had come from the village Saistabad in Ghosi police station — the worst affected police station in the sub-division. Gandhiji visited that village, too.

An incident happened that evening at Jehanabad, which showed how raw the Muslim feeling still was. Some members of the local Muslim



League had met Gandhiji at Patna. Gandhiji good-humouredly asked them if they would keep their "enemy No. 1" (meaning himself) in their homes, when he visited Jehanabad! They protested that nobody regarded him as the enemy of Muslims; he would be most welcome and they would make all arrangements for him and his party. Gandhiji promised to come and stay with them. But his caravan was big. One of his secretaries, in her overconcern for his comfort, without consulting him, agreed to his being the guest of the authorities, in spite of the fact that Gandhiji had already accepted the Muslim Leaguers' invitation. When Gandhiji came to know of it, he felt very sorry and tried to contact the Muslim League friends to make amends. But they could not be traced. On reaching Jehanabad he again tried to send for them but in vain. Suddenly he heard that they had passed a resolution accusing him of "a breach of promise". It saddened him that they should have allowed quick, unfounded suspicion to take hold of them and failed to see that he had no other object in coming to Bihar except to serve them. He dwelt on this point in his prayer address that evening.

The big Maidan near the inspection bungalow was packed to overflowing. Addressing the surging mass, Gandhiji referred to the common weakness of misunderstanding one's opponent and hastily attributing motives without adequate proof. Such behaviour often led to untoward results, which prudent people avoided. It was such misunderstandings that were largely responsible for the difference between the Congress and the Muslim League, which everybody deplored and which had led to such deplorable results.

Amathua in Jehanabad police station was a predominantly Muslim village. It had narrowly escaped being attacked by the riotous mobs during the disturbances owing to the timely arrival of the military and the police. Gandhiji visited the villages of Amathua and Belai on the morning of 27th March. There was a Muslim League relief camp at Amathua where suspicion and distrust ruled supreme. A seat was improvised for Gandhiji under a spreading banyan tree in the heart of the village, where the refugees had gathered. A paper was read out to him by a representative of the refugees. It was full of acrimony. The whole scheme of rehabilitation was characterised as a "big fraud"; neither the Government nor the Congress had the "slightest intention" of "really doing anything". The atmosphere was so surcharged with bitterness that Gandhiji asked the representatives of the refugees to come and see him later at Ghosi.

Belai had been attacked by a Hindu mob on the 3rd November, 1946, some of the victims being nationalist Muslims. One had to tread through the village cautiously, as lanes were still strewn with rubble. Gaping walls and ruined roofs met the eye everywhere. Wells choked with decomposing corpses bore the tell-tale evil smell. Gandhiji stood like one transfixed as one sufferer pointed out the place where his beloved



ones lay. Occasionally a stray bone crunched under the feet. A mosque had been damaged. A few books were found burnt to ashes in one of the rooms. The only reassuring sign, indicative of the slow return to normality, was that one Muslim was prepared to come back. The material for the construction of his house was due to arrive soon.

At 8 a.m. the party arrived at Ghosi. The Muslim friend, who had read that offensive paper at Amathua relief camp, came to see Gandhiji. He said that the Muslims had faith in Gandhiji but in nobody else. Gandhiji told him that the way he had acted at the meeting at Amathua was not proper. The Muslim friend stuck to his indictment of the Government and expressed the fear that unless it was warned, old history might be repeated as soon as Gandhiji left Bihar. Gandhiji told him that he was in constant touch with the League leaders. He had met most of them since his arrival and he would see to it that justice was done to the Muslims. But he could not agree with the remedies that the Muslim friend had suggested. He knew there were Muslims in the Punjab and in Noakhali who thought that no Hindu should live there, as there were some Hindus who thought that no Muslims should live in Bihar. To him, however, it was clear as daylight that Pakistan or no Pakistan, Hindus and Muslims had to live together and as friends. It was for both parties, therefore, to recognise that fact and not act in a manner that would foster enmity and bitterness which would recoil upon them with deadly effect later.

Before the evening prayer which was held at Okri, Gandhiji visited 3 other affected villages. His mind was full of the dark implications of the madness which had wrought the desolation and destruction which he had been witnessing during the day. Was the peace that seemed to reign in the land on the surface only a lull before the storm?

In the first pronouncement which the new Viceroy had made on assumption of office, observed Gandhiji at the evening prayer meeting, he had announced that he had been sent as the last Viceroy to wind up British rule in India and hand over power to the Indians. They must have noticed also that the pronouncement was deliberate, unconditional and unequivocal. He knew that British declarations continued to be regarded with deep distrust in India, not without good cause. But a votary of Satyagraha accepted every declaration at its face value, without qualification. His experience was that the deceiver always lost, never the dupe if he was brave and honest. He very much feared that unless they woke up, India might lose the golden apple of independence which was almost within their grasp. If the insanity of Bihar and the Punjab became general he could clearly envisage to himself the Viceroy being tempted to eat his words uttered solemnly on a solemn occasion. "Heaven forbid that such an occasion should arise but suppose it did, even though mine should be the only voice, I would declare from the housetops that the Viceroy should firmly and truly carry



out his declaration, complete the British withdrawal and leave India to her fate.”

But, proceeded Gandhiji, he was not so much concerned about the madness of the Punjab, bad enough though it was, as he was about the people of Bihar going back on their repentance. That very morning he had been in a village where, near a mosque, someone — certainly not a Muslim — had felled on the previous night a stately coconut tree which was adorning what was a make-shift grave over the bones of the Muslims, killed during the disturbances. Was it any wonder that the Muslims were hesitating to accept their assurances? He confessed he was shaken in his belief in the plighted word of the Bihari Hindus after what he had seen that morning. He hoped that the people would find out the culprit and induce him to make an open, clean confession and a declaration of repentance which should serve as a lesson to all others of that type.

Gandhiji then referred to the criticism against the Ministers for not having provided habitations for the refugees. He knew the defence of the Ministers. And because he knew it, he said, he would repeat the advice he had given to the teachers and pupils of the high-school at Ghosi that morning that the Hindus should make it their duty voluntarily to renovate and rebuild the destroyed houses and make them sufficiently attractive and safe to draw the refugees back to their homes. He had heard also that some abducted Muslim girls were still missing. He hoped that the information was not correct. But lest some of those girls, if there were any, might be murdered in order to suppress evidence, he implored those with whom they were detained to return those girls to Badshah Khan or to him, if not to the authorities, so that they might safely be restored to their families. He repeated that there could be nothing more disgraceful than competition in doing evil. Those who had indulged in those crimes had disgraced themselves, their religion, their community and the country which had given them birth.

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From Okri Gandhiji returned to Jehanabad for the night. The party was small, the pressure of work heavy. The daily mail showed no sign of diminishing. But the biggest headache was the counting of small coins, contributed at the prayer meetings, for the Muslim relief fund. On the previous evening Manu and Hunar were at it till midnight. Manu's eyes were red and swollen for lack of sleep. She had to be ordered to bed. Poor Hunar had to do it alone by keeping awake till 1 a.m. When the sum was sent to the bank next day, a small discrepancy in counting was discovered. That got him into the soup. Gandhiji said that an error of a single pie was inexcusable in a cashier! One of the party tried to put up a defence: large sums, sometimes exceeding one thousand rupees, mostly in small coins, had to be counted every day and Gandhiji insisted upon the count being completed



overnight. Flesh and blood had their limits and nature claimed its due, and so on. But to excuse oneself with Gandhiji was to accuse oneself. He was inexorable. He had done all those things himself and had a ready solution for every one of their difficulties. Counting could be facilitated by "arranging coins in piles of equal height on a level board and then multiplying the number of piles with the coins in one pile." Or, the coins could "be weighed and the exact number of coins determined by dividing the total weight by the weight of a specific number of coins!" This was a specimen of the little lessons that those who were privileged to be near Gandhiji received from him every now and then.

The 28th March opened with a meeting with the Muslim refugees at the house of the President of the Muslim League, Jehanabad. A local Hindu member of the Legislative Assembly was also present. The Muslims complained that he had incited and helped the rioters during the disturbances. It was further alleged that he was related to a notorious dacoit. The member of the Assembly denied that he was related to the dacoit in question. As for the allegations against him, he was prepared to face an inquiry by a body of Muslim Leaguers themselves. If they found him guilty, he would submit to any punishment. Even otherwise, he would carry out Gandhiji's orders.

Gandhiji remarked that if the dacoit referred to was still at large, every effort should be made to arrest him and all should cooperate with the Government to that end. "It is a challenge to the Government. If the Government fails to arrest the culprits, it will stand discredited." Turning to the member of the Assembly in question, he told him that a special responsibility rested upon him, he being a member from the locality. If the Muslims suspected him of complicity in the riots, he should resign his seat even though the suspicion against him was unfounded. To the Muslims Gandhiji said that they should seek God's truth only, prove their charges and if they could not be proved, unreservedly withdraw them. It was later discovered that it was not the member of the Assembly in question but another person who was the real culprit, and he was absconding. Gandhiji thereupon remarked that it was tragic that real culprit had successfully eluded arrest for so long. It was the duty of every one to help in his arrest.

One of the refugees said that as the Ministry and the officers had not discharged their duty properly during the disturbances and had forfeited their confidence; they should be removed. But on that point Gandhiji was adamant. Exactly the same question had come up in Noakhali and he had said that nobody could remove Suhrawardy from office except the people who had voted him into office. Similarly, the Bihar Ministers could not be asked to resign unless the people who had sent them there wanted it. "The Bihar Ministers have told me that if I ask them to resign, they would do so. But it would be wrong on my part to ask them to resign. I can ask them to do only what is reasonable."



How far was it true friendship, he was asked next, when the mentality of the Hindus had not yet changed, to ask the Muslims to go back with faith in God alone. Had not God Himself given them the warning signal in the recent disturbances?

In Noakhali he had said, replied Gandhiji, that nobody could compel Shaheed Suhrawardy to keep the Hindus there, nor could the Shaheed force the majority to act against their will. For, they would then rebel. In the same way, however much he might like them to take their courage in both hands and stay on in their old places, he would not ask them to stay on in the place of danger against their will. "You can get compensation for your property and go where you like. I shall try my best to see that this is done."

With reference to their demand that at least fifty per cent. of the policemen and officers in charge of new police stations that were being set up to create confidence among the refugees should be Muslim, Gandhiji said he could not support any such demand. Nor did he think that such a demand on the part of non-Muslims in Pakistan would be countenanced either. For that would mean that the bulk of the police in Pakistan should be non-Muslim. "Therefore, I say, there is no other course open to Hindus and Muslims than to be friends one of the other."

It was next put to Gandhiji that repeated mention of Noakhali in his speeches in Bihar was likely to make the Hindus think that what they had done was only in answer to Noakhali. Would not that create difficulties in the way of changing their mentality?

Gandhiji answered that the inference was not correct for he had not spared the Hindus. In fact there was a time when he used to be equally plain-spoken with the Muslims, too. He had even fasted for twenty-one days for what they had done in 1924. The Muslims did not then regard him as their enemy. But of late he had to confess that when he spoke about Muslims, he did so very guardedly. "I avoid reference to Noakhali as much as I can. But to avoid it altogether would not be right. I must not remain silent in the face of the disturbing news that keeps coming in from Noakhali and the Punjab, if only for the sake of Bihar Muslims. The two are so interlinked."

Their last question was in regard to the Bihar Government's decision to appoint Mr. Reuben of the Indian Civil Service as the sole judge on the Bihar Inquiry Commission to report on the disturbances. How could such a one-man commission command their confidence?

Gandhiji replied that there was no harm in having a one-man commission if the man could be trusted to do justice. If, however, they had no confidence in Mr. Reuben, they could name someone else whom they trusted. But to hold anyone as a suspect simply because he was a non-Muslim was not right. Personally, said Gandhiji, he would have liked the judge to be a Muslim, provided he was acceptable to all. Unfortunately, in the vitiated atmosphere of the times, Hindus did not



trust the Muslims and the Muslims the Hindus. If they could give any names of non-Muslims whom they could trust, his task would be easier. "I am not one of those who would refuse to do anything simply because the League wants it. Truth alone should be our criterion, no matter who utters it."

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In the afternoon Gandhiji met the representatives from the surrounding villages and the Muslim refugees. The questions that had been asked at the morning meeting and Gandhiji's answers were read out to them. They then proceeded to ask additional questions.

Gandhiji agreed with them that where the Muslims had in panic sold their property at ridiculously cheap prices they should be able to get the same back at those very rates. Police outposts should be opened at places where looting and destruction of property was still going on. An inquiry should be held into the conduct of the officers who were guilty of gross neglect of their duty during the disturbances, and those against whom the charges were established should be dismissed. It was further suggested to Gandhiji that attention should be paid to the irresponsible and communally-minded section of the Congress. Gandhiji replied that unlike the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha the Congress was meant to serve all. If it belied its nationalist character, it would destroy itself.

One of the refugees brought up a more vital question : "Does the experience that you have had and the atmosphere that you find around you lend you any hope of success in your mission of re-establishing lost confidence between the Hindus and Muslims?"

"Man can only try," replied Gandhiji. "The result is in the hands of God."

Addressing the village representatives next, Gandhiji exhorted them to cleanse their hearts. If they told him they were innocent, he would not believe them. If a single Hindu had committed the crime, they were all responsible for it. Could he reassure the Muslims on their behalf, he asked, that the realisation of their sin had been brought home to them and their hearts had been thoroughly cleansed by genuine repentance? If, on the other hand, they felt that in butchering the Muslims they had done the right thing, they should say so plainly, so that he might know exactly where he stood and decide his future course of action accordingly. For, he had sworn to "do or die" in Bihar.

A meeting with the Congress workers followed. Gandhiji was asked: "The Muslims who fled their homes are trying to sell their properties at cheap rates and the Hindus naturally want to buy them. Should they do so?"

"Honesty demands that the deal should be fair," replied Gandhiji. "The Hindus should pay the Muslims a fair price for their property. As a matter of fact, instead of buying it they should hold it in trust."



“Should we ask the Hindus not to buy their property?”

“Yes. But it should not develop into a boycott as in Noakhali. We should not take advantage of Muslim distress.”

## 2

A lightning police strike was in progress in Bihar in the later half of March, 1947. It had caused considerable anxiety not only to the Bihar Government but the Home Department of the Government of India also.

Ever since his arrival in Bihar Gandhiji had felt that if he could reform the police it might help ease communal tension in Bihar. It was the infiltration of the police force by communalism that was in no small measure responsible for the carnage that had taken place.

The strike was symptomatic of the transition from rebel India to India responsible for its own administration. The police department had always been the most corrupt but it was through the arm of law that the British had maintained their stranglehold on India. It was a measure of the national will to be free that in 1942 even the police, especially in Bihar, was affected and some of their members openly joined the freedom movement and suffered imprisonment in consequence. In jail they were lionised by the Socialist leaders and a close tie sprang up between the two. It grew closer after their release. For right up to the actual transfer of power, the Socialists were distrustful of the British *bona fides* and were of the view that an even fiercer movement than the “Quit India” struggle of 1942 would have to be launched before India could come into its own and in that the cooperation of the military and the police would be an important factor.

The police department had earned a bad name for brutality. The officers ill-treated their men and the men ill-treated the public. There was a growing resentment among the rank-and-file against the alleged ill-treatment by the officers and the Socialists were not above working up that feeling as a weapon against the Government. The Congress policy of non-victimisation, on the other hand, of such members of the services as had through excess of loyalty or over-zeal allowed themselves to become the tools of repression during the “Quit India” movement had embittered the police leaders against the Government and there had grown up considerable tension between them and the loyalist section who, in their eyes, had betrayed the freedom struggle but who continued to be regarded as the backbone of the administration by the Government.

On the 20th March, 1947, a police Havildar was convicted of contempt of court by the sub-divisional officer, Gaya. The Gaya police, thereupon, gave notice of strike unless redress was given to the Havildar and the sub-divisional officer punished. An immediate inquiry was ordered by the District Magistrate. Nevertheless the strike commenced



on the 24th March and the strikers refused to return to duty even though the inquiry commenced the same day. From Gaya the strike fever spread to Patna and Monghyr. The military was called out and on one occasion British troops had to be used. Both sides resorted to firing. As a result some constables were killed and more injured. One soldier was badly wounded and later succumbed to his injuries.

Some representatives of policemen met Gandhiji at Jehanabad on the 28th March, and again later at Patna. He told them that their strike was ill-advised and there was no convincing argument in favour of continuing it. They were not mere wage-earners. They were members of an essential service. Limbs of the law were expected to put duty before self-interest. If they continued their strike until their demand was conceded, it would jeopardise their case. They should, therefore, immediately and unconditionally call off the strike. The Government of the day was their own and there was no loss of dignity in surrendering to it. But they should follow his advice only if their leaders confirmed it. While they belonged to their organisation, loyalty demanded that they should consult their leaders before they acted upon his advice.

For some time past the Muslim policemen had been organising themselves separately under the influence of the Muslim League. Gandhiji deprecated the growing rift between the Hindu and the Muslim policemen and told them that the Hindu policemen should treat their Muslim colleagues as their own brothers. Their conduct should be such that both Hindus and Muslims should have equal faith in them and the Muslims should not feel that for their protection they needed Muslim policemen and *vice versa*.

Gandhiji had thought of talking over the matter with the Ministry. But even before that he told one of the Socialist leaders who saw him in that connection that if the Socialists continued to tamper with the police, it would lead to very serious consequences. At the same time he felt strongly that the Government had acted very wrongly in calling out British soldiers to deal with the strike. British soldiers should not have been used in any circumstance.

The next day the President of the Policemen's Association, Ramnand Tiwari, who was absconding, met Gandhiji at Patna with the Socialist leader, Jayaprakash Narayan and, under Gandhiji's advice, decided to surrender to the authorities and to advise his comrades to give up the strike and rejoin duty. He was taken into custody from Gandhiji's camp and handcuffed like an ordinary criminal. Gandhiji did not like it. Surely, nothing would have been lost if a more chivalrous treatment had been accorded to a person of that type.

Before surrendering, Tiwari issued the following statement: "I have talked to Gandhiji and have come to the conclusion that I should surrender myself. I feel that that is the only way of succeeding in the struggle in which the policemen are engaged. I appeal to my comrades



that they should give up the strike and rejoin duty. I also appeal to Gandhiji that he should take up our case and obtain for us justice.”

Gandhiji felt, here was a great opportunity to reform the police service which had for years been a running sore in the administration. But the Chief Minister begged Gandhiji to let the Ministry deal with the situation in the normal way and Gandhiji, not wanting to force anything on the Ministry which did not appeal to their head and heart, withdrew though not without a pang. It was well known that the Home Department of the Government of India at the time was very allergic to any tampering with the police, particularly in view of the open preaching of violence by the Muslim League. Was it due to that or was it because of the old bureaucratic tradition which the Congress Government in Bihar, and the Interim Government at the Centre, had inherited that made them persist in handling new situations in the old way? Any way, Gandhiji's effort was defeated and a great opportunity to reform a vital section of the services was lost.

Ramanand Tiwari was sentenced to ten years rigorous imprisonment. He was acquitted on appeal by the High Court on the main charge (conspiracy to wage war against the King and to overawe by criminal force the Government of Bihar) but was convicted on the charge of causing disaffection among the police and sentenced to six months' rigorous imprisonment when he had already been in prison for a much longer term. After remaining in jail for about 2 years as an under-trial prisoner and another eighteen months as a convict, he was released on the eve of the 1951-52 General Elections. He stood on the Socialist ticket, defeated his rival Congress candidate and was returned as a duly elected member to the Bihar Assembly.

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After the meeting with the policemen at Jehanabad on the 28th March, Gandhiji accompanied by Badshah Khan and party, left for Malathi and Gangasagar villages. The experience that awaited him there was depressing. In a meeting with the representatives of the Hindus in the afternoon he suggested to them that they should remove the fears and suspicions of the Muslims by giving them the necessary assurances. But not one Hindu got up in response. Gandhiji had not the heart after that, according to his practice, during the later part of his tour in Bihar to ask the Muslim audience on their part to cleanse their hearts. They were the injured party and it was for the Hindus to lead the way to repentance. He suggested to the Congressmen, within whose jurisdiction inhumanities had been perpetrated, that they could not be absolved from responsibility unless they could induce all culprits to come out into the open and wash themselves of their crimes.

A special train brought the party to Patna at 10 at night. Some members of Gandhiji's party proceeded from the station by car by a somewhat shorter route so that they reached the camp a little in advance



of Gandhiji. Two friends met them at the gate; their faces were grave. A great misfortune had befallen Bihar. Prof. Abdul Bari, the Muslim President of the Bihar Provincial Congress Committee, had been shot dead by a Gurkha of the anti-smuggling force. He was challenged by the Gurkha on duty but failed to reply. The Gurkha levelled his gun at Prof. Bari. Prof. Bari felt affronted, jumped out of the car and tried to snatch away the rifle from him. The other Gurkha on duty pressed the trigger, a shot rang out and one of the noblest sons of Bihar fell a victim to a trifling defect of temper, a trivial error of judgment. The air was thick with wild rumours. It was a measure of the panic in the Muslim mind that, not knowing at the time the circumstances of Prof. Bari's death, some prominent Muslims began to have dark forebodings as to their own safety.

Abdul Bari was a veteran Congressman. By his selfless service in the cause of labour, particularly the Jamshedpur labour, he had endeared himself to the people of Bihar, who honoured him by electing him as the President of the Provincial Congress Committee. A fearless fighter, he had served the Congress steadfastly during all the phases of the freedom struggle. His one fault was his quick temper. Gandhiji had hoped that on his return from his tour of the villages he would speak to him and help him to get rid of his shortcoming, which comported ill with his high office. He had faith in Abdul Bari and he knew that his word carried great weight with him. But God had willed it otherwise and Bihar was fated to lose the unique services of one who combined with his dauntless courage the heart of a *fakir*.

Early next morning, Gandhiji paid a condolence visit to the members of the bereaved family. The house was located in a narrow lane and bore witness to the ascetic simplicity of Prof. Bari's life. Everybody had testified to his renunciation, but the indigence that met Gandhiji's eyes inside was enough to wring anybody's heart. The deceased could easily have become rich, if he had wished. His poverty was all the more remarkable in that it was voluntary and craved for no recognition. "Men like Bari never die," observed Gandhiji at the evening prayer meeting. "It is for those who remain to carry on the noble work that he has left unfinished."

On the 30th March, 1947, Gandhiji left for Delhi in response to an invitation from the new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, and returned to Bihar after a fortnight. (See Vol. III, Chapter IV).

### 3

The Muslim League continued to obstruct the work of rehabilitation. Having got the refugees under its influence, it sought to create conditions which would make the schism between the two communities permanent, and, if possible, secure nearly half of Bihar for Pakistan.



The demand for pockets became a vital link in its strategy. It was natural, while the feeling of insecurity prevailed, for the Muslims to want to congregate in villages where they were in large numbers. The League sought to make this into a permanent feature of Bihar's polity. The Government tried to meet their demand halfway. But to yield an inch to the League meant always a demand for an ell. From the idea of selected pockets they proceeded to the idea of contiguous pockets, and from contiguous pockets to the division of Bihar itself, to provide an independent homeland for the Muslims, which along with Jharkhand would join Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> The bastion of Pakistan would thus protrude right up to the end of Chotanagpur. If that happened, what could be more natural than that the aboriginal tribes of Central Provinces should desire to join their brothers of Chotanagpur. The big State of Hyderabad abutted on these areas and being the biggest hereditary Muslim State, had the "right" to belong to this joint federation of Muslims and aboriginals. Goa was later declared to be the "natural" outlet to the sea for Hyderabad. Secret negotiations were said to be proceeding for its sale to the Nizam. Here was in the making the 1,200 miles long "corridor" running across India. Having effectually cut off South from the North of India, and enabled the Dravidians to break off from the North, Pakistan would woo them as their "deliverer". Dismembered and weakened, the Indian Union, with the tentacles of Pakistan running deep through its flesh, would not be able to control the various Indian Princes, especially the Muslim rulers, who would always have at their beck and call the powerful State of the Nizam.

The utterances of Jinnah and the way in which the Muslim League's political demand had been mounting up had created in the minds of the nationalists a lively fear that after partition, the next step would be for the League to make Pakistan a spring-board for the subjugation and conquest of India. This was later embodied in the Muslim slogan, *Hanske liya hai Pakistan, Larke lenge Hindustan*. (We got Pakistan by joke; we shall take India by force.)

The full potentiality of the pockets idea found part expression in a pamphlet entitled *Divide Bihar*, issued by the Muslim Students' Federation, at the time of the second session of the "Division of Bihar Conference" held at Gaya in April, 1947. In the foreword to this pamphlet Syed Jafar Imam, President of the Bihar Provincial Muslim League, wrote:

The general massacre of the Musalmans of Bihar by the Hindus, has proved beyond doubt that the Hindus and Muslims are two nations, and, therefore, they must separate. The Musalmans living in Pakistan zones will soon have their own independent sovereign State, since Pakistan is a certainty and no power on earth can prevent it now. But what will happen to the five million Muslims of Bihar, who form a minority of 13 per cent. and are surrounded by



a hostile majority all over the Province? . . . After full consideration, we have come to believe now that our salvation lies only in establishing an independent homeland for us in some part of the Province of Bihar where we may be able to concentrate our entire population. . . . I . . . fully support the demand for the separation of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas from Bihar. There is no justification for keeping Chotanagpur attached to the Province of Bihar for exploitation by the Caste Hindus of the Province. . . .

The pamphlet went on:

If the five million Muslims of Bihar are to be saved from complete annihilation and ruin, the existing Province of Bihar must be partitioned in order to provide a separate homeland for them. . . . The contention that since the Muslim population is scattered in Bihar and nowhere forms a majority they cannot have a homeland of their own, is absurd. Rights belong to human beings and not to lands or areas. Five million Muslims of Bihar . . . want to live their own lives free from the fear of domination and annihilation by others. . . .

They demand that the entire district of Purnea, South Bhagalpur, South Monghyr, the entire district of Patna, the sub-divisions of Jehanabad and Nawadah and some parts of the Sadar sub-division of the district of Gaya should constitute a homeland for the five million Muslims of Bihar. A large part of the Purnea district is already predominantly Muslim. Other districts in South Bihar mentioned above have been the seat of Muslim culture and, therefore, must be given to the Muslims.

The Musalmans of Bihar fully support the demand of the people of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas for separation from Bihar. The Adibasis (aboriginals) and Muslims of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas together form a majority in that area and they have been demanding separation of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas from Bihar for a long time. . . . Geographically, economically and culturally Chotanagpur with Santhal Parganas is a separate land and has nothing in common with Bihar.

The districts demanded as homeland for the Muslims of Bihar form a contiguous area and may form some sort of union with Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas and make a strong independent sovereign State.

Firoz Khan Noon carried the project further: "For the 47 lakhs of Bihar Muslims, there are two courses open: (a) they can move into Western Bengal involving exchange of population, (b) they can move either to the North of the Ganges where their population is 22% or to the South where their population is about 11%. Inside Bihar, or Western Bengal, they can be given an area which will be federated with Pakistan. I am inclined to think that Adibasi tribesmen of Bihar Province will want to federate with Muslim Bengal and not Hindu Bihar. If a plebiscite of Adibasis were held, their verdict would be clear. If they had separate electorate today they and the Muslims would form a majority in the Bihar Legislature. Jamshedpur with Tata (iron) Works



is in the Adibasi country and all the mineral resources of this tract are today being exploited for the benefit of Akhand Hindustan. Adibasis, who eat beef and bury their dead, are as far apart from caste Hinduism as Islam or Christianity.”<sup>2</sup>

That the Adibasis had been well roped in was clear from the speech of Kanu Kickoo, Secretary, Santhal Parganas Adibasi Sabha, delivered on the occasion of the “Division of Bihar Conference”: “It is the highest travesty of constitutionalism that the Adibasis, who form the seventy per cent. of the total population, have been reduced to a very ordinary majority. . . . Let the Mongol, Aryan or any race for that matter, quit and hand over the country to its genuine inhabitants, the Adibasis. . . . Racially and culturally we are distinct entities from the Hindus. Geographically Jharkhand stands out from the rest of Bihar. . . . What we want is simply this: ‘Hands off Jharkhand’.”<sup>3</sup>

Of the same order as the demand for the formation of pockets were the demands already noted for arms licences to the Muslims, and for 50 per cent. of the postings in the police being from the Muslims etc. To concede the League’s demand would have driven a permanent wedge between the communities and divided them into two hostile camps. Gandhiji’s mission was to heal the wound, not to aggravate or perpetrate it. The League was not willing to cooperate in such a mission. The Government in sheer despair dropped negotiations with it altogether. But in Bihar Muslims were the injured party and the Bihar Muslim League was their representative organisation. Never once did Gandhiji utter a word to disparage it or fail to show to it all the consideration that he possibly could. Later, when the Muslim League’s overbearing tactics alienated even the Bihar Muslims and brought it into open conflict with other Muslim parties, he consistently refused to lend any encouragement or support to its opponents or do anything that might undermine its prestige. He advised the Government again and again to strive with the League.

#### 4

The attitude of the League towards Gandhiji, while he was in Noakhali, was one of suspicion. His work in Bihar produced a tremendous impression on the Muslim masses; and in private conversation the League leaders, too, expressed confidence in him, and wished him success in his mission. But the whole atmosphere was vitiated. The Bihar Muslims felt disappointed just as a section of the Hindus in Noakhali had felt disappointed when he discountenanced their demand for more military and more police, firearms and concentrations. A Muslim correspondent wrote: “You have not succeeded in doing anything to console the afflicted Muslims of Bihar, nor do you sincerely intend doing anything. Your special mission seems to be only to praise the Congress



Government of Bihar.” The League by the momentum of its past tradition showed a proneness to slip back into its attitude of distrust, despite its professed confidence in him, and was quick to misunderstand.

An apt illustration of this was the correspondence that passed between Syed Abdul Aziz and Gandhiji. The two sore points were pockets and firearms for Muslims. Gandhiji was opposed to both. He remarked in one of his post-prayer speeches that those who made such suggestions did not know what they were talking about. He was against issuing of firearms even to the Hindus. He had told the Hindus of Noakhali that their arms should be a living faith in God and a stout heart born of that faith. Elaborating the same theme two days later he remarked that his dream was not that the soldiers and the police should save their honour but that every man and woman should be the custodian of his or her own honour. This was possible only under the rule of Ahimsa and no other. He had never wearied of repeating that the highest form of bravery was that which was expressed through Ahimsa.

But all this was not grasped by Syed Abdul Aziz. He wrote: “Your opposition to the formation of small colonies in which the Muslims hopelessly scattered could live with safety and your determination to disallow even a few guns to the needy Muslims have deeply depressed me and many others. . . . The right of private defence is a human and natural right and has been recognised . . . universally in all countries of the world. . . . You have, I regret to say, repeatedly said . . . that you could not allow anyone the right of private defence. If your idealism was tempered with realism you would probably have changed your views. Muslims faced with overwhelming majority in seven out of eleven Provinces feel that your law, if practised, would spell disaster for them.”<sup>4</sup>

Gandhiji replied:

My opposition to the formation of colonies is restricted to the Government cooperation even to the extent of land acquisition. I should have no objection to affected Muslims congregating in Muslim areas. There should be no check on free movement or migration.

Your legal acumen should have prevented you from making the sweeping remark that I had ever denied the right of self-defence. That right does not and ought not to carry with it the licence to bear arms. A moment’s reflection would show you its futility. What you want probably to convey is that it is the right of the citizen, however humble he or she may be, to demand protection by the State against thieves, robbers and miscreants. A Government that fails to perform that duty forfeits all claims to govern. Let me add, too, that neither during my stay in England nor for 20 years in Africa did I ever know a Westerner feeling incompetent to defend himself without arms when and if the occasion arose. Like several superstitions this one you name seems to be confined only to this unhappy land of ours.<sup>5</sup>

Syed Abdul Aziz returned to the charge: “You seem to have



missed two main points which I made in my previous letter. Formation of colonies for scattered Muslims is not possible except, perhaps, in 2 or 3 places of the affected areas, without cooperation of the Government. Land sufficient even for a small colony is not in possession of the Muslims. Unless, therefore, the Government acquire building sites, colonies cannot be established. Government have in many cases acquired large tracts of land . . . for public purposes, but they refuse to do so for the protection of the Muslims. If your opposition to the formation of colonies is based on the attitude of the Bihar Government and not on the merits of the proposition, we would feel that you have not exercised your vast influence with them.

“If my remark regarding your denial of the right of private defence is, in your opinion, sweeping, it is based upon your own reported speeches in which you have shown, without reservation, your opposition to the right of private defence with firearms. It is not clear from your reply whether you support the right of private defence, if it is exercised with swords, kirpans, axes and *lathis*, etc., and not with firearms. If a body of only 20 or 30 Muslims or Hindus are attacked by a mob of, say, only 200 variously armed, what is their chance to defend themselves successfully unless they possess better weapons—guns or rifles? You seem to be very favourably impressed with the ways of a Westerner. Do you really think that he, as a rational and practical man, would not resort to firearms, if available, in self-defence? If he was circumstanced as a member of a communal minority, similar to one in India, he would ask not only for a gun or a rifle but even for more deadly and effective weapons. How are the Muslims in Bihar—13%—to protect themselves when they are rushed upon by a hostile Hindu mob vastly superior in numbers, and not without some other advantages by having their own people in power?

“The Bihar Government have totally failed to protect the Muslims against organised dacoity, arson and murder. . . . The Government which have failed now will fail in future too, and therefore, some guns and rifles are a necessity for a weak party without relieving the Government of their duty and responsibility to provide their own ways and means for the protection of a small minority like the Muslims in Bihar.”<sup>6</sup>

Gandhiji was averse to engaging in a dialectical tournament with Syed Abdul Aziz. As he had said before, he was quite content to be beaten in debate so long as he could hold his own in acts of service. He had expressed his views on self-defence and the use of arms on a previous occasion as follows:

I hate duelling, but it has a romantic side to it. . . . I would love to engage in a duel with the Big Brother (Maulana Shaukat Ali) when we are both satisfied that there is no chance of unity without bloodshed, and that even we two cannot agree to live in peace. I must then invite the Big Brother to a duel



with me. I know that he can twist me round his thick fingers and dash me to pieces. That day Hinduism will be free. Or, if he lets me kill him despite his strength of a giant, Islam in India will be free.... What I detest is the match between goondas of both parties.... The way to get rid of... cowardice is for the educated portion to fight the goondas. We may use sticks and other clean weapons. My Ahimsa will allow the use of them. We shall be killed in the fight....<sup>7</sup>

It was difficult for Gandhiji not to sympathise with the fears of the Bihar Muslims after all that they had been through. Yet he felt certain that he was a wiser friend of theirs than they themselves were, though he could not make them see it at the time. He made good his claim before long by his readiness to immolate himself for their sake, and the Muslims not only in Bihar but all over India, who had opposed him, quarrelled with him, suspected his *bona fides*, and called him names, remained to pray and ultimately to mourn. Gandhiji's reply to Syed Abdul Aziz ran:

If any of my actions were based on the attitude of the Ministers I should be of little use here. I have come, if I can, to serve the Muslim minority of Bihar as I was in Noakhali to serve the Hindu minority. In so doing my fond belief was and is that I should serve the majority, too. Thus I was, and am, against pockets promoted by authority in either case and so against firearms. That way lies strife, not friendship, whose roots are firmly fixed in love, not fear. Man can but perish in the attempt. Success is from God.

If the Hindus are to be considered as a hostile community for all time I confess that segregation is the safest policy. That is the logic of Pakistan which I have opposed knowing full well that I might find myself in the minority of one.<sup>8</sup>

Referring to Abdul Aziz's gibe that Ministers and he were having armed guards, Gandhiji's letter proceeded: "When Ministers and I cannot live without armed guards, you undoubtedly prove our cowardly impotence but do not sustain your argument for possession of firearms by impotent men. Fancy me carrying a pistol for self-defence !!!"

Syed Abdul Aziz found no use in continuing the discussion. His last letter said: "The Government were already opposed to and were niggardly in allowing a gun to a Muslim and now they will refuse it without the least compunction. The policy of the Government supported by you should help Muslims to decide either to surrender completely to the Congress or to abandon the Province for good."<sup>9</sup>

To it Gandhiji replied: "You are less than right when you say that 'the policy of the Government supported by you should help Muslims to decide either to surrender completely to the Congress or to abandon the Province for good.' My policy is no firearms to civilians in the ordinary course and perfect protection to every citizen, be he poor or rich.



If I know anything of the Government of Bihar, they do not want Muslims or anyone else to surrender to the Congress or leave the Province for good.”<sup>10</sup>

Gandhiji was on very delicate ground. His arguments did not find favour with the Muslim intelligentsia. Only his having suggested a similar remedy to the Hindu minority in Noakhali, which was similarly placed as the Bihar Muslims, prevented his motives from being suspected. But his ideas were dismissed as idealistic and fantastic nonsense. Strange to say, he inspired confidence in the Muslim masses of Bihar. They seemed instinctively to understand him and started going back to their villages except when they were again frightened by some stray untoward incident or by the League propaganda. Two instances from a report of Major-General Shah Nawaz, who was posted at Masaurhi and was working under Gandhiji's guidance, illustrated the change that was coming over the scene: “In the village of Atarpura, we had a meeting and appointed a village *panchayat*. Two days afterwards the head of the *panchayat* came to Patna, met all the refugees in various camps and assured them that they would welcome them back to their village and . . . protect them with their lives. As a result, nearly fifty Muslim families have returned to the village and are living there very happily. There is no police force stationed there nor have they asked for any. When I sent rations there, the Hindus refused to accept them, saying that the Muslims were their guests and they would make suitable arrangements for their feeding and harvesting of their crops, etc.

“In the second case, one Muslim of village Bir came to me and informed me that he wished to go back to his village. This was his first chance to go back after the riots. He was crying and was afraid to go alone. I gave him my car and sent two Indian National Army men to accompany him. On the way he met a Hindu member of the Bir village *panchayat*, who stopped the car and asked him why he was taking guards with him. The Muslim informed him that he was afraid. The Hindu friend then told him that it would be a matter of shame if after Gandhiji's assurances it was still necessary to take an escort with him. He also assured the Muslim that he would get killed before any harm came to him (the Muslim). The Muslim gentleman thereupon returned to me saying that he no longer required an escort, as he was feeling quite safe.”

The League felt perturbed over this change. Peace Committee workers found League volunteers creating panic among those who had returned. For the sake of uniform administration, the Government at last decided to take over all refugee camps under Government control. Feeling the ground slipping from under its feet, the League made a last desperate stand.

The Digha camp in Patna was a Muslim League controlled refugee camp. The Government issued an order that the League



volunteers would no longer get rations from the Government and they would no longer be allowed to sleep there. It was an order applicable to whatever party was in control of camps, and was the first step to complete control of the camps by the Government. The League decided to resist and the League President and the League Secretary paid one of their very few visits to Gandhiji on the 15th April. They wanted the order to be cancelled, at least stayed, till the 20th of April, by which time, they would have gone to Delhi and consulted Jinnah.

Syed Jafar Imam, the Provincial League President, explained to Gandhiji that they were not cooperating with the Government because it had not bothered even to discuss their demands but they were not obstructing the rehabilitation work in the interest of the masses. He gave his version of the situation in the refugee camp: The Government had ordered that all the refugees must go back to their villages, otherwise their rations would be stopped. That was not the way to send the sufferers back to their homes. The League volunteers had been ordered to leave the camp. The Magistrate would go that day to get the order executed. If no settlement was arrived at, Jafar Imam said, his volunteers would court arrest. They could not honourably desert those whom they had sworn to protect. He then went on to recall the good old days of the Khilafat when Gandhiji was claimed both by the Hindus and the Muslims as their own. He expressed his full faith in Gandhiji and hoped that he would enable a settlement to be arrived at between the Bihar Government and the League. The whole idea was to put the Government in the dock with Gandhiji's help and afterwards pose as the successful champion of the refugees against the "oppressive Bihar Congress Government" whose decisions even the Mahatma had felt compelled to reverse, if Gandhiji supported their demand, and to denounce him if he did not. Gandhiji told him that if there was an order that the League volunteers should leave the camp, they should do so, otherwise it would be very difficult for him to plead for them with the Government.

Jafar Imam: "We bow before your affection. The Government wants to remove the League from the camp in order to destroy its influence amongst the refugees. That would render the refugees helpless and force them to go back under the pressure of Government threats. We feel that to attempt to weaken our organisation in this fashion is not proper."

Gandhiji assured him that no-one could destroy the influence of the League that way. He had even declared that he would gladly have Jinnah as the first President of free India. He had no quarrel with the League though it regarded him as its enemy. Such things only made him smile. He related how in Delhi a Muslim League leader had openly declared him to be enemy of the Muslims, but the wife of this gentleman with her sister came and had a friendly and cordial talk with him



the next day. If he was sincere, he added, others were bound to understand him one day. They had fallen on evil days but he had full faith in God.

Gandhiji's interviewers did not seem to be interested in all that. The League was only playing for time and in the end Gandhiji had to fall back baffled. That is how the talk proceeded:

Gandhiji: "Then let us meet again and discuss the whole affair."

Jafar Imam: "We are all going to Delhi and will not be back till the 20th April."

Gandhiji: "Then depute somebody who can act on your behalf."

Jafar Imam: "There will be nobody here. You kindly get the order stayed till the 20th. When we are back we shall discuss the matter with you and arrive at a decision."

Gandhiji: "I shall talk the matter over with the Ministers, and understand their point of view. If after talking to them I feel that your volunteers should leave, will they do so?"

Jafar Imam: "We pray that you don't go there. If somebody misbehaves, it would be very painful to us. We would not like you to be disobeyed."

One of Gandhiji's secretaries intervened at this stage and explained that the Government order for the time being only was that the volunteers would not get Government rations or be allowed to sleep there. The order applied equally to all volunteers and was not directed against any particular community or organisation.

Jafar Imam: "Night is the only time when women and children require protection."

Gandhiji: "Suppose I or any of my representatives goes and sleeps there, would it not serve the purpose?"

Jafar Imam: "We do not want you to take this trouble upon yourself at this age. We would only request you to get this order stayed till the 20th. That would prevent many unnecessary complications."

Jafar Imam saw Jinnah at Delhi but never visited Gandhiji on his return to Patna. Instead, on the 29th April, he wrote the following letter of injured innocence: "The conversation that myself . . . had with you on the 15th April, 1947, has not come out in full in the Press and has been only twisted and misinterpreted in some sections of the Press, which has created unnecessary confusion and is likely to do harm instead of good to the cause. I hope you remember that when you asked for our cooperation in the matter of rehabilitation, we had told you that . . . we had no confidence in the Government and had therefore stopped seeing the Chief Minister, and we were only there as you had declared (sic) you were on a peace mission in Bihar in which we wished you success and (offered) our cooperation in that connection. I may also remind you that there was absolutely no talk about Nationalist Muslims, not to speak of having confidence in them. I understand our talk was



noted down by your stenographer and hope, after consulting the same, you will very kindly send me a reply. . . .”

All that Gandhiji had said in his post-prayer speech after the interview, and which appeared in the Press, was: “I also met the Leaguers. They said that though they belonged to the League, that did not necessarily make them the enemies of non-League Muslims. The League President, Jafar Imam Saheb, was a great friend of Dr. Mahmud.”

Gandhiji asked his secretary, who had taken rough notes, to reconstruct the whole interview and send the reconstructed interview with a true copy of the rough notes, and a copy of his speech which contained the reference to the interview, to Jafar Imam. In his covering letter he wrote: “Our conversation was so cordial that I referred to it in my post-prayer speech, of which a brief account was issued to English newspapers. I do not read what newspapers write on their own account. . . . If there is any mistake kindly point it out.”

The League leaders after that always kept away from Gandhiji. But they were prolific in sending telegrams to him containing highly coloured complaints without the least attempt at verification, which they subsequently released to the Press.



## 'IF I WERE A MINISTER'

## 1

THE MUSLIM LEAGUE was not the only obstacle in the way of the rehabilitation of the Muslims. Khaksars ("Servants of Dust") were another.

Khaksars were a semi-military organisation like Hitler's Nazi Storm Troopers with the avowed object of establishing "Muslim hegemony" over India and the world, by methods which did not exclude the use of force. In the past the Congress had been their particular target of attack and after the formation of Congress Ministries in the Provinces, in 1937, the British bureaucracy was strongly suspected to have encouraged and patronised them as a counterpoise to the Congress movement. Unfortunately for themselves, they were always in trouble with some group or another and in the end their violent tactics compelled the Central Government to take action against them. While Gandhiji was in Noakhali, some representatives of the Khaksars had approached him with the request to intercede with the Interim Government for the release of some of their men who were then in prison. Gandhiji asked them to send him all relevant papers. This they never did.

After the Bihar disturbances batches of Khaksars were sent to Bihar with the professed object of rendering humanitarian service to the riot sufferers irrespective of caste or creed but really to rehabilitate the prestige of their organisation which had suffered eclipse.

The Bihar Government, in accordance with its policy of welcoming the cooperation of non-official organisations in the relief and rehabilitation of refugees, gave the Khaksars facilities for their work. Encouraged by this the Khaksars next proceeded to draw up a "pact" or "agreement" between the Bihar Government and themselves. Among other things the "agreement" stipulated that, (1) *Bona fide* refugees attested to by the Khaksars should be allowed a rehabilitation grant of Rs. 1,000 per man; (2) the Khaksar organisation should be in direct contact with the Bihar Government concerning matters of detail and should be empowered to settle disputed matters, if any, directly with the Chief Minister; (3) planning of houses and resettling of refugees in proper places should be at the discretion of the Khaksar organisation; (4) lands and immovable properties belonging to settlers coming under the care of the Khaksar organisation, and unclaimed or deserted property should be disposed of



at the discretion of the Khaksar Relief Committee; (5) the Khaksars should create an organisation of paid engineers and builders to work entirely under them and the Bihar Government should pay for their services; and (6) the proposal of the Khaksar organisation for the levy of a cess to make the relief scheme effective should be considered favourably by the Government.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time they started propaganda among the refugees that they should refuse to go back to their villages unless and until the Khaksars' "irreducible minimum" demands were conceded by the Bihar Government. The Bihar Government could not accede to these demands which would have had the effect of "displacing the Government in respect of certain functions".<sup>2</sup>

The Khaksars met Gandhiji on the 7th March, soon after his arrival in Patna, to place before him their "grievances". Gandhiji told them that while the Bihar Government would naturally welcome help from any organisation which was willing to work on their terms, he could not advise them to abdicate any of their functions in favour of a private organisation. The Khaksar leaders proceeded hyperbolically to praise their own past record of selfless service which was without the "slightest communal bias". Gandhiji told them to spare themselves that trouble. For they were not meeting him for the first time; he knew them well enough! The subtle irony of the remark was lost on the sturdy soldiers or perhaps ignored by them. Their *Salar* (leader) jumped at the remark and said that as Gandhiji knew them, he was sure he would stand guarantee for them and "compel" the Government to "accede" to their demands. They would in that case bring back all the refugees since the refugees and even the Hindu public had full faith in them in view of their record of "unbiased" service!

They met him again a few days later and said they wanted freedom to work in their "own way" — the Government should provide the finance. Gandhiji was, however, clear that they had to work under the Government and carry out its policy. He reminded them that the Government had to consider other parties as well. For instance they were bound to try to secure the cooperation of the Muslim League in the first place. If the League refused to cooperate then only could it negotiate with other parties.

The Khaksars talked of the desirability of raising an "auxiliary force" drawn from the refugees for affording protection to those who returned. Gandhiji was opposed to this also. Nor was he agreeable to the proposal for forming a trust of the properties of those who had left the Province. He would instead advise the Government to declare their terms. Such refugees as returned should have all the protection and help which they needed, but the Government could not undertake any responsibility in respect of those who chose to stay away. "If in this way only five return and they are well treated, they are bound to draw another



five after them. If the Government implements its trust fully, I am sure, all the refugees would return.”

The discussion with the Khaksars could not proceed further as the League was still being tackled. Ultimately, however, the Muslim League declared non-cooperation with the Government. By that time the Government's own scheme was in operation and they were anxious to finish the work of rebuilding the devastated houses before the rains set in. They could not afford to get involved in a new scheme under a new organisation at that stage. If the Khaksars wanted, they could work under the existing scheme. The Khaksars were not prepared to do that.

The question was again taken up towards the end of May. On the 21st May, Gandhiji wrote to the Khaksars: “In view of the draft of the agreement you have sent me, I hardly think it worthwhile our meeting. The agreement seeks in my opinion to displace the Government for a particular purpose. This, I think, no Government can or should do. . . . My views being as strong as they are, the best way for you is to settle directly with the Government.”

The Khaksars' tactics irritated him. They put into his mouth words which he had never used. They held him responsible for the delay in the “Khaksar-Government agreement” regarding rehabilitation. Yet they did not leave him in peace as they knew that he was the only man through whom they could have their demands acceded to, even in part. Their letter to Gandhiji of 21st May is a fair specimen of their tactics: “We have read the agreement drafted by us over and over again since, and I fail to see how the agreement ‘seeks to displace the Government for a particular purpose’. I assure you that there is no purpose (behind it) except quick, smooth and efficient work of rehabilitating the unfortunate lakhs who are now groaning under what you yourself called ‘shameful and disgraceful conduct of Bihar Ministry’. . . . You call my draft ‘unfortunate’; with due respect I consider your verdict that we are ‘seeking to displace Government’ as unjust. I shall now wait for your version of the agreement. . . . Whatever you will advise in the matter of rehabilitation of four lakh unfortunates, Government will do. If you don't say anything, nothing will happen. The blame for nothing having been done so far, I fear, rests on you. . . . On the other hand, our last two days' conversation with you convinces me that you are most keen on our taking up the work as soon as possible. As I have said . . . I shall agree to the draft you propose. Please, keep it ready when we meet you tomorrow.”

To this Gandhiji replied the next day:

I see that we do not see eye to eye on things. I have never accused the Bihar Government of “shameful and disgraceful conduct”. I would like you to send me the paper from which you have quoted me. I cannot suggest another draft agreement. There can be none. It is open to you to place any blame



you like on me for things done or not done by the Bihar Government. I can see nothing wrong or offensive in the Government letter of which you have sent me a copy.

That brought down the ire of the Khaksars: "There is no question of 'our not seeing eye to eye on things'. We . . . can accommodate ourselves in spite of difficulties. You have already expressed yourself on the matter of rehabilitation and you can mend matters if others cannot. Our aim is work and work alone. We have no mental reservations. . . . When we see you . . . you may point out our shortcomings in the proposed draft."<sup>3</sup>

They met him again on the 23rd May. In a letter which they wrote the same day, the determination to pursue their own path without any compromise was evident in spite of affected humility. Still in his anxiety to meet their point of view, as far as he possibly could, Gandhiji prepared a draft and gave it to them. A note followed:

With reference to the draft proposals a copy of which was sent to you last evening . . . and which I would be prepared to recommend for adoption by the Bihar Government, I hope your organisation will be able to work under the Government and its instructions. Of course the Ministry will be at liberty to vary the proposals from time to time as may be required by circumstances. I would advise you to see Ansari Saheb, the Minister in charge, and settle details of work.<sup>4</sup>

The draft proposals were as follows:

"Where houses are not already rebuilt and the refugees themselves choose to rebuild, the Government will grant not more than Rs. 1,000 against proof of actual and necessary expense to that extent. Special cases requiring greater expense will be considered on merit.

"Rehabilitation grant not exceeding Rs. 500 per family of five members will be granted when required.

"Artisans and agriculturists will get interest-free loans to be repayable in five years in five instalments for the purchase of seeds or implements such as looms, etc.

"Free education will be provided for children and work will be given to those who may need it. Rations against work during the recuperation period will also be provided.

"Provision for orphanages and widows' homes will also be made."

But before the Khaksars could get in touch with Ansari, the Minister in charge, as suggested by Gandhiji, they got into conflict with the police. Baulked of their ambition to get the whole of the Bihar Muslim refugee population under their control, through their scheme of rehabilitation, they were at no pains even to make an outward show of respect for authority.

At this time came "Bahadur Shah Day" which the All-India Khaksar



organisation had decided to celebrate all over India on the 10th June. Bahadur Shah was the last Muslim Emperor of Delhi who was deposed after the Sepoy Rising of 1857 and died in exile as a prisoner of the British at Mandalay (Burma). His name was used as a rallying symbol by the Khaksars in advancement of their movement for the revival of Muslim hegemony. Having allowed themselves to be caught napping once before, the Bihar Government were in no mood to let that happen again. While, therefore, a meeting of the Khaksars was allowed, they were clearly told that no processions would be allowed in any circumstance.

On the morning of the 10th June, the local officers, however, received information that the Khaksars proposed to take out a procession in the evening without even asking for permission. The Muslim city Superintendent of Police, therefore, went and contacted the local Khaksar leader and explained to him that an order banning meetings, and processions, was in force, and they should abandon the proposed procession. The Khaksar leader refused to comply saying that he had orders from his leaders to take out a procession and that he would do so at any cost. The Superintendent of Police and the sub-divisional officer, therefore, tried to prevent the procession from forming but the Khaksars slipped out through bye-lanes and appeared on the main road, shouting the slogan, *Jo samne aye sir utarlo* (lop off the head of anyone who comes in your way and tries to stop the procession). The Magistrate on duty confronted the processionists, declared them to be an unlawful assembly, and asked them to disperse. Instead of dispersing, they became violent and started attacking the police force with *belchas* (spades). The police made a *lathi*-charge whereupon one of the Khaksars opened fire with a revolver, injuring two constables who fell down. The remaining constables were also surrounded and overwhelmed. The Magistrate, finding the situation grave, summoned the armed police force and ordered them to open fire. In all 13 rounds were fired before the Khaksars, who continued their attack, dispersed. The injured Khaksars and the police were sent to the hospital. One Khaksar was killed on the spot and 12 others received injuries. Out of these 4 died later. One Assistant Superintendent of Police and 8 constables received injuries at the hands of the Khaksars, the injuries of two of these being caused by revolver bullets. The Bihar Chief Minister reported to Gandhiji: "These facts would make it clear that fire was opened only when it was absolutely necessary and the casualties on the two sides will show that the force used was the minimum necessary to save the lives of the constables."<sup>5</sup>

The Khaksar version of the incident among other things contained the following: "It is certain now that Bihar Ministry because they were compelled to accept the demand of Rs. 1,500 per family of Bihar refugees through your intervention, retaliated on Khaksars as soon as Allama Mashriqi left Patna. . . . I hold Congress responsible for this



massacre of innocent Khaksars. . . . I met the Hon’ble Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. . . . Panditji taking a one-sided view of the affair has disappointed us. I am meeting him again. I shall try to explain to Panditji . . . (how) the Bihar Government’s action surpasses in cruelty and arrogance all human imagination. . . . I request you to deal with the affair very promptly. Our demands are: (1) Rs. 20,000 for each Khaksar martyr; (2) unconditional release of the innocent Khaksar prisoners and return of the confiscated property; (3) rehabilitation of the Bihar Muslim refugees in accordance with the pact reached between Mahatmaji and the Khaksar Negotiating Committee with further assurance that such acts of cruelty and arrogance will not be repeated again.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that the letter was minatory in its tone and contained many a falsification of facts ‘within Gandhiji’s knowledge, he forwarded it to the Bihar Chief Minister. To the Khaksars he wrote:

Must I despair of converting you to the use, whenever you can, of Urdu language in place of English. Thus, your letter . . . is a case in point. You will then probably have avoided exaggerations into which you have been betrayed.

There was certainly no compulsion against Bihar Government in regard to the acceptance of your demand nor could there be any demand by a member of the public upon his Government, nor was your proposal for the payment of Rs. 1,500 per family of Bihar refugees accepted. So much about what you state as facts within my knowledge. Though I cannot speak from knowledge, I am quite sure that there was no connection whatsoever between what happened on the 10th June last and the rehabilitation scheme.

I also told you when we met . . . that Pandit Nehru should be ruled out of the discussion of your proposals. I do not see how he could intervene as a member of the Central Government.

Further, is not your statement that the Bihar Government’s action ‘surpasses in cruelty and arrogance all human imagination’ somewhat extravagant? I suggest that the use of such language and statements as cannot be supported by evidence is not the way to attain a peaceful end. . . . Nevertheless . . . I am sending . . . (your letter) to the Chief Minister of Bihar. I note that you were good enough to send me an extra copy of your letter.<sup>7</sup>

The Khaksar case was killed by its own falsehood, leaving many Khaksars in prison when the Khaksar leader disbanded the movement. When later they offered to leave the Province, the Government released them.

## 2

When Gandhiji arrived in Bihar in the first week of March, 1947, he found the Government faced with the tremendous task of rehabilitating thousands of human beings, uprooted from the soil where they had grown for centuries. The terrible shock of the disaster had created



complexes which made a right solution well-nigh impossible. The Muslim League's obstructionism was holding up the rehabilitation of the refugees, with the result that the Government was faced with the prospect of feeding and clothing nearly 52,000 of them without any end in sight.

During the week which was destined to be practically his last in the Province (third week of May, 1947) Gandhiji put final touches to the scheme for rehabilitation which the Government had prepared in consultation with him. He had tackled a similar situation in Noakhali. His plan was based on an unshakable faith in the fundamental goodness of humanity. It was this latent fund of goodness in the human heart which he wanted to release by evoking true repentance in the hearts of the wrong-doers, and courage and forgiveness in those of the victims. For this he had need to establish his *bona fides* with both.

In Noakhali the Hindus had faith in him while the attitude of the Muslims, in the bulk, was unfriendly. That he had not been able to convince the Muslims of his sincerity in spite of a lifetime of service he characteristically attributed to some shortcoming within himself. The remedy, he argued, lay in still greater self-purification. For that he needed God's grace. Such was the inner urge he felt in that supreme hour to throw himself entirely on God that sending away all his old associates he set forth on a village-to-village tour on foot in the devastated area without a time limit until true heart-unity was established between the two communities. As he trekked bare-footed through villages that had been the scene of devastation, through gloomy forest depths and amongst people who had been taught to regard him as their worst enemy, he gave them a chance of seeing him at close quarters and judging for themselves whether he was their enemy, as he was depicted to be, or their friend. More and more Muslims came to his prayer meetings. He reminded them of the noble teachings of their religion and how they had dealt it a cowardly blow and degraded themselves by behaving like beasts in respect of the minority domiciled in their midst. The chanting of Ramadhun and the devotional accompaniment of songs to which his pilgrimage for peace was performed came to the riot-affected people as a "shower of mercy". They felt within them the stirring of a new courage and hope which rescued them from their dead-alive existence.

In Bihar the picture was reversed. It was the Muslims who had been the sufferers. He gave them the same message of courage and reliance on God, as he had given to the Hindu victims of riots in Noakhali. But here he had yet to convince the Muslims of his friendship beyond the shadow of a doubt; he had to be extremely cautious. In Noakhali if a riot-victim came to him weeping, he reprimanded him or her for unbecoming sorrow. But in Bihar such a thing might be mistaken for heartlessness. Even what little he said to the Muslims was sometimes misunderstood and aroused resentment. But he knew that the safety of



the minority lay only in the re-establishment of heart-unity between Hindus and Muslims — not in arms, not in Muslim police, not even in "pockets". These were remedies born of despair, likely only to aggravate the disease. Still out of sympathy with the terror-stricken Muslim sentiment, he said that such Muslims as wished should be free to go where they felt safe. He suggested that the Government should buy their property and repair the damaged houses on its own. Sooner rather than later the Muslims would return when things settled down. If they did not return, the houses would become State property. But the Muslims at that time were obsessed with the idea of pockets. They took time to decide. Ultimately the policy of re-building the houses of those only who applied for it was adopted. The building operations proved to be slower than had been anticipated. The result was that the monsoon came and the mud-walls, which had in most cases remained standing, crumbled down in the rains. Most of the houses in consequence had entirely to be rebuilt and it cost the Government much more than it would have if they had followed Gandhiji's advice and started repairing all the houses without waiting for the Muslims to apply.

But whilst the Government were prepared to help such Muslims as might want to migrate from their villages by buying up their properties, they could not force the Hindus at any place to vacate their lands and homes for the Muslims. That would have sown seeds of permanent conflict. The situation was extremely delicate.

With the Hindus of Bihar Gandhiji had a tremendous advantage. At places the Hindus went to the refugee camps as suggested by him, brought back the Muslims and fed them at their own expense. Crowds vied with one another in contributing to the Muslim relief fund. There was a distinct improvement in the atmosphere in the villages. But Gandhiji was not the one to be easily satisfied. The situation offered no ground for self-complacency. As late as 16th May, 1947, he wrote to a Christian missionary friend: "The work is difficult but faith to be faith has to overcome mountains. We have to try to cultivate such faith."

In the building of houses, Gandhiji laid down the principle that the owner should be encouraged to build them or get them built himself. That would insure economy, prevent corruption and infuse the spirit of self-reliance in the people. If the refugees were not prepared to do it themselves, contractors should be entrusted with the job. None should grudge the contractor reasonable profits. If, however, they should set about exploiting the misfortunes of others, the Government should step in and entrust the work to popular or private organisations.

The refugees demanded that their losses should be fully compensated. Gandhiji told them what he had told the Hindus of Noakhali, viz., no Government could afford to compensate fully for the losses sustained during mass-madness. All that the Government could undertake to do was to enable the refugees to stand on their legs. When one



of his secretaries, whom he had left behind in Bihar to carry on his work, met him in Delhi a few days before his last fast in January, 1948, he advised him to take the initiative and build them thatched, mud houses. Similarly, in Noakhali he had suggested simple huts made of bamboo, mud and straw. With regard to the amount of the relief-grant, he laid down that a house-building grant not exceeding Rs. 1,000 might be given in exceptional circumstances but as a general rule it should be up to Rs. 500 only. The corresponding figures for Noakhali were Rs. 500 and Rs. 250 respectively.

The rebuilding of houses, however, would take some time. How in the meantime were nearly 50,000 refugees to be maintained? Ever since South Africa, Gandhiji had specialised in handling large masses of people. His principles were self-help, equality and dignity of all labour, whether physical or intellectual, and rations against work only. He brushed aside all arguments of pity as "sentimental" and the plea of inability to find suitable work for all as "resourcelessness". The morale of the people had to be kept up. And there should be no dearth of suitable work. The tanks had to be cleaned, roads to be built and repaired, clerical work could be provided. Even the maintenance of refugee camps could provide ample employment to the refugees if the camps were run on self-help principle. Sweeping, scavenging, cooking, etc., everything should be done by the refugees themselves. No work should be regarded as low or mean. To labour with the hands was with him a gospel. If they all strove in that direction in an organised manner, the management of camps would become a simple matter and the camps would provide excellent training in corporate living. His ideal from the point of view of efficiency was a military camp.

Apart from the refugees and those who wanted to go back to their original homes and whose problem, therefore, simply was one of rebuilding their houses, there were those who did not want to go back to their original homes but wished to move to another village. Their problem was put forward by the Relief Commissioner, Mr. Houlton, in a note: "This is a crucial problem which is coming up all over the disturbed areas. It is not altogether a result of political moves, or the 'pocket idea'. It is one of the main reasons for the failure of the bulk of the refugees to return to the villages. In fact very often, it is only a case of 20 or 30 families from a small village . . . wanting to move to a village which has a population of say 100 families. They want the added social, religious and educational amenities of such a move, as well as what they think to be added safety. Such a concentration can hardly be called a 'pocket' or become a menace to communal goodwill or brotherly feeling between the communities."<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, if the Government declared that in all cases where a refugee refused to go back to his old home, he would be given the cash value of his land and house, Mr. Houlton was afraid that



there would be a temptation "no doubt to be actively exploited by certain politicians" to take the money and go to another Province. "At the present time of political uncertainty and general nervousness, the tendency will be all the greater. If such a movement once starts, it will have a snowball effect." If the plan recommended by him were adopted, Mr. Houlton went on to say, there was a good chance of their getting nearly all the Muslim leaders "except the most extreme" to cooperate in their work of getting people back to the villages. "At present even Congress Muslims, and those most anxious to help Government, are not giving us full support owing to uncertainty about the problem. They all consider that some concession, on the lines which I have indicated, is necessary."

After considering Mr. Houlton's suggestions, Gandhiji set down his conclusion as follows:

I am quite clear in my mind that the Muslims in the affected areas, who by reason of fear or the distressing memory of their dead kinsmen do not wish to return to their homes, should have the option of settling where they like even outside Bihar against compensation being given to them for loss of land and tenement which will revert to the State. Compensation will consist of the sum fixed by valuers at the present rates of land and habitable tenements in place of those destroyed by the rioters. The valuation of the tenements must not exceed Rs. 1,000 at the outside. The above having been conceived purely in the interests of the sufferers, it presumes every previous effort being made by the State to dispel all fear of repetition of tragedy by adequate police protection and ridding the place of known marauders, etc.<sup>9</sup>

Gandhiji helped, too, to put into shape the machinery both official and non-official for actual rehabilitation. Dr. Mahmud, the Development Minister, had created a very good impression on the Muslims during the riots and had won their confidence. Maulana Azad and Dr. Rajendra Prasad had advised the Bihar Premier to put relief and rehabilitation work in Dr. Mahmud's charge. But for certain reasons, the Bihar Ministry were reluctant to entrust the rehabilitation work solely to him. The Muslim League exploited this as a proof of the Bihar Ministry's anti-Muslim bias. Dr. Mahmud felt very sore about the whole affair. He hardly attended the Cabinet meetings thereafter, and consistently kept away from rehabilitation work. Ultimately, Abdul Qayum Ansari, the only other Muslim Minister in the Bihar Cabinet, was put in sole charge of the rehabilitation work. Gandhiji tried to bridge the unfortunate gulf between Dr. Mahmud and the other Ministers and later to bring the two Muslim Ministers together. But before his efforts could bear fruit, the tide of events bore him away to a different scene where other pressing tasks and duties engulfed him without any respite and the Bihar issue merged in the wider issue of all-India.

As in Noakhali so in Bihar Gandhiji made the attitude of the Govern-



ment and people respectively in regard to the ringleaders and noted criminals involved in the disturbances the acid-test of their sincerity. On it depended not only the success of rehabilitation but in a large measure the future of India. Gandhiji's advice to the criminals was that they should sincerely repent and surrender themselves to the police. It would be bravery openly to confess what they had done and face the consequences. The State, if it was to justify its existence, must trace every criminal and all loyal subjects should cooperate with the State to that end. If the public sheltered the criminals the State would have no alternative but to impose punitive tax on the whole locality. Asked as to the desirability of granting general amnesty at the request of political parties of both the communities, he replied that there could be no question of general amnesty. If however the parties concerned agreed to withdraw any case, the Government could allow them to do so. Even then, those accused of murder and offences against women could not be so forgiven. They had to come and make a confession of their guilt before the open court, not to save their skin but as a token of their readiness to take the consequences. If the court felt that the repentance was genuine and the complainant wanted to let bye-gones be bye-gones, it would be a case for clemency. Gandhiji's ideas here, again, were based on faith in human nature. The tremendous fund of goodness, resourcefulness and energy latent in the people should be released. That alone could provide a solution to the problem which otherwise seemed well-nigh insoluble.

The work of rehabilitation by its very nature could be tackled only with strong non-official support. In the beginning of January, 1947, it was decided at a meeting of workers from all districts held at Patna that a Peace Committee be formed to maintain peace in the Province. It was also decided at that meeting to organise a net-work of centres and start work after the manner of the Gandhi Camp in Noakhali. But not more than two or three centres could be opened. In a meeting of the Peace Committee held in Gandhiji's presence on the 29th April, 1947, the members ascribed the failure to dearth of suitable workers. Gandhiji told them that the real cause would be found to lie in some shortcoming in themselves, which they should try to overcome. They had an important role to play, as the "eyes and ears" of the popular Government, which could not, like the foreign Government, afford to depend upon the Criminal Investigation Department alone. They should keep a close watch on the officers and report their misconduct, if they found any, to the Ministers without going to the Press. In Noakhali Shaheed Suhrawardy had discounted the reports of non-official organisations and relied on the reports of his police officers instead, whom he had described as his "eyes and ears". Speaking from his own experience, said Gandhiji, he could say that as "eyes and ears" the police were both blind and deaf. It was the function of the public workers to bring the police to a sense



of their duty. Houses had been burnt, women had been abducted, and yet the police said there was no proof. How could the poor Muslims produce evidence in the circumstances? Gandhiji, therefore, suggested where a murder had been committed and the murderer was untraced, that the officer in charge should be dismissed. The Peace Committee workers should also help trace the criminals and inform the police. If they could induce the criminals to surrender voluntarily, it would be still better. The Government could not do that. It could only arrest and punish the criminals.

Another knotty question was whether the non-official Peace Committee could expect financial help from the Government. Gandhiji said that the Government could only give money for certain specific purposes. Where the Government could not help, the Committee should rely on private funds. For Congress workers engaged in the work of rehabilitation, he laid down the principle that they should not expect the Government to pay for their expenses nor should they accept any remuneration from the Government if they were to maintain their independence and keep the Government on the right track. He had given the same advice to the All-India Spinners' Association in the Central Provinces. The Association gave technical advice to the Government and also received funds necessary to carry on the activity entrusted to it by the Government, but did not accept any money for itself. It was different if they brought workers from outside to help the Government. The Government would then pay their expenses.

What should be the status of non-official organisations vis-a-vis the Government? Gandhiji's view was that the Government should accept the help of any non-official agency that would carry out the policy of the Government. For instance, the Government should approach the Muslim League and if the latter was prepared to carry out the Government's policy, the whole work of rehabilitation might by choice be entrusted to it. The Muslim League might regard the Congress as its enemy; it was not for the Congress Government to regard the League as its enemy. It should try to draw the League to itself. But it must be on its (Government's) terms, without giving the League an official status. The mistake which the Government had committed by handing over complete control of refugee camps to the League without binding it down to its own policies should not be repeated. Lastly, if there were complaints against the Government machinery, non-official workers and agencies should talk it over with the Government but must not interfere.

After consultation with the non-officials, Abdul Qayum Ansari, the Rehabilitation Minister, formulated a comprehensive plan of rehabilitation designed for the quick disposal of work. The rainy season was coming, when life in the camps would become increasingly difficult. Refugees from Bengal had also started coming back, and the influx was likely to increase with the onset of the rains. Gandhiji discussed the



scheme carefully and in detail with the Minister and later put down his ideas in the form of a note for the latter's guidance which can serve as a model for all workers engaged in the field of rehabilitation under similar circumstances:

If I were Minister in charge of rehabilitation work, the first thing I would do would be to have my duty clearly defined. The Ministers would have to put me in charge of the magistracy and the police, insofar as I need them, to enable me to clothe the refugees with full protection against loot, arson and murder, and give me control over the movement and prices of foodstuffs, clothing and building material for the refugees. Having thus secured my position, I would proceed immediately to find out the number of those who have returned, where they are and how they are faring. I would do this personally and deal with their complaints there and then.

As to those who have not yet returned, I would issue notices in the Press and distribute leaflets in the language of the Province, stating precisely the terms under which they may return. I would not worry about those that do not return.... The Government's duty... commences only when they return. I would promptly deal with the communications from or on behalf of those who wish to return and even get private persons to help the needy to return. The lands and buildings of the absentees, I would hold in trust for them but would give notice that, after the lapse of the period stipulated in the notice to be issued, the buildings and the land would vest in the State for it to make such use as it deems fit for the benefit of the absentee's next of kin or failing them the Muslims of the Province or a portion thereof.

I would invite the cooperation of the local League and give their recommendations every legitimate consideration.

I would not give doles to the refugees but expect them to do some work which they are capable of doing against rations or other aid given to them. I would make them feel in every way that they are fully worthy of all the aid the State can give them in this manner.

I would bring to trial without delay all those who are detained as suspects and arrest those who are still evading justice. No stone should be left unturned in order to trace culprits and bring them to justice.

Before Gandhiji finally left Bihar on the 24th May, 1947, he had thus helped not only to give final shape to the official as well as the non-official machinery for rehabilitation but had also laid down the lines on which they should work. Psychological rehabilitation, too, had made good progress. He had hoped to return and complete what remained as soon as he should be released from Delhi. He was sure that if the poison could be effectively neutralised anywhere in India its influence would spread and India might yet be saved from the desperate course of self-amputation into which she was being driven in spite of herself. But God had willed otherwise. He never could settle down in Bihar. Thereafter he was destined to devote more and more of his time and attention to the



capital. The same mission that had taken him to Noakhali and then brought him to Bihar now took him to Delhi. The scene shifted; the battle remained the same.







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## NOTES

### VOLUME II

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##### CHAPTER I

- 1 *Harijan*, November 10, 1946, p. 394.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. 389.
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 396.
- 4 *Ibid*.
- 5 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III, xviii.
- 6 Prayer speech, November 3, 1946.
- 7 *Ibid*.
- 8 *Harijan*, November 24, 1946, p. 413.
- 9 *Ibid*.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 414.

##### CHAPTER II

- 1 *Harijan*, November 24, 1946, p. 412.
- 2 *Harijan*, December 8, 1946, p. 432.
- 3 *Ibid*.
- 4 Gandhiji to Narandas Gandhi, December 5, 1946. Quoted in *Harijan*, January 5, 1947.

##### CHAPTER III

- 1 Gandhiji to Narandas Gandhi, December 5, 1946.
- 2 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 22, 1946.
- 3 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 5, 1946.
- 4 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 21, 1946.
- 5 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 22, 1946.
- 6 *Ibid*.
- 7 Gandhiji to Shaheed Suhrawardy, December 24, 1946.
- 8 Manu Gandhi's diary, February 2, 1947.

##### CHAPTER IV

- 1 Gandhiji to Sardar Patel, December 30, 1946.
- 2 Gandhiji to Sardar Patel, January 6, 1947.



- 3 Prayer speech, December 4, 1946.
- 4 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 21, 1946.
- 5 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 24, 1946.
- 6 Rajaji to Gandhiji, December 3, 1946.
- 7 Gandhiji to Asutosh Sinha, Vice-President, Tipperah Rescue, Relief and Rehabilitation Committee, November 27, 1946.
- 8 *Young India*, June 1, 1921, p. 174.
- 9 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1946, p. 251.
- 10 St. Francois de Sales, quoted in Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1946, p. 253.
- 11 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1946, p. 251.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Harijan*, August 19, 1939, p. 236.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Young India*, December 31, 1931, p. 428.
- 16 Quoted from *Bombay Chronicle* by Prabhu & Rao, *Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, Madras, 1946, p. 41
- 17 *Harijan*, August 18, 1946, p. 267.
- 18 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 37.
- 19 *Harijan*, June 8, 1935, p. 132.
- 20 *Young India*, December 31, 1931, p. 428.
- 21 *Harijan*, May 5, 1946, p. 113.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Harijan*, August 18, 1946, p. 265.
- 24 *Ibid*, p. 267.
- 25 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 36.
- 26 *Young India*, November 17, 1921, p. 377.
- 27 Gandhiji, *Ethical Religion*, Madras, 1922, p. 62.
- 28 *Young India*, October 11, 1928, pp. 340-41.
- 29 *Harijan*, December 10, 1938, p. 373.
- 30 *Young India*, October 11, 1928, p. 340.
- 31 Gandhiji, *An Autobiography*, Ahmedabad, 1937, Vol. II, p. 62.
- 32 *Harijan*, August 18, 1946, p. 267.
- 33 *Young India*, September 24, 1931, p. 274.
- 34 *Harijan*, June 1, 1935, p. 123.
- 35 Gandhiji, *An Autobiography*, Ahmedabad, 1927, Vol. I, p. 175.
- 36 *Young India*, March 5, 1925, p. 81.
- 37 *Harijan*, March 23, 1940, p. 55.
- 38 *Young India*, April 4, 1929, p. 111.
- 39 *Young India*, March 5, 1925, p. 81.
- 40 *Harijan*, March 23, 1940, P. 55.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Young India*, March 5, 1925, p. 81.



- 45 *Harijan*, August 19, 1939, p. 238.
- 46 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1946, p. 216.
- 47 *Harijan*, March 3, 1946, p. 26.
- 48 *Harijan*, July 21, 1946, p. 229.

#### CHAPTER V

- 1 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 11, 1946.
- 2 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 8, 1946.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 9, 1946.
- 5 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 8, 1946.
- 6 *Harijan*, January 12, 1947, p. 490.
- 7 *Ibid*, pp. 490-91.
- 8 *Ibid*, p. 491.

#### CHAPTER VI

- 1 Dr. Amiya Chakravarty to Gandhiji, December 20, 1946.
- 2 Shamsuddin Ahmed to Manoranjan Chowdhury, December 20, 1946.
- 3 Hamiduddin Ahmed's statement, *Azad*, December 14, 1946.
- 4 Gandhiji to Hamiduddin, December 27, 1946.

5 A notable instance was the case of Arya Samajists—one of the reformist sects among the Hindus. They were very angry with him for giving his candid opinion in regard to some of their doctrines and activities in the course of defending them against attacks by the Muslims. He refused to take notice of their manifestly unjust attacks as anything that he said would be used by their enemies as ammunition against them. The other instance, even more notable, was his absolute refusal to pass judgment on the popular acts of violence during the Quit India struggle unless he could with equal freedom give to the Government's "leonine violence", too, its due.

6 Mankaran Sarma (in charge of Marwari Relief Society at Lakshmipur) to Sudhamoya Ghose, January 3, 1947.

- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Report of Dr. Vardaranjan Pillai, January 4, 1947.
- 9 Sardar Patel to Pyarelal, December 16, 1946.
- 10 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 4, 1946.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Gandhiji to Sardar Patel, December 25, 1946.
- 13 Gandhiji to Chhotubhai Purani, December 22, 1946.
- 14 *Young India*, December 20, 1928, p. 420.
- 15 Gandhiji's diary, December 23, 1946.
- 16 Prayer speech, December 26, 1946.
- 17 *Harijan*, September 29, 1946, p. 332.
- 18 *Harijan*, October 13, 1940, p. 319.
- 19 Gandhiji to Mirabehn, January 4, 1947.



- 20 Mr. Attlee's cable to Pandit Nehru, November 27, 1946.
- 21 Mr. Attlee's cable to Jinnah, November 30, 1946.
- 22 Rajaji to Gandhiji, December 3, 1946.
- 23 *Harijan*, December 29, 1946, p. 471.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Gandhiji's note to the Congress Working Committee, December 4, 1946.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Gandhiji's note to the Congress Working Committee, December 29, 1946.
- 29 Gandhiji's note to the Congress Working Committee, December 17, 1946.
- 30 Gandhiji's note to the Congress Working Committee, December 29, 1946.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Gandhiji's note to the Congress Working Committee, December 4, 1946.

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### CHAPTER VII

- 1 *Hindusthan Standard*, January 3, 1947.
- 2 *Hindusthan Standard*, December 24, 1946.
- 3 *The Hindu*, December 28, 1946.
- 4 Gandhiji to Sardar Patel, December 30, 1946.
- 5 Sardar Patel to Gandhiji, January 7, 1947.
- 6 Gandhiji to Sardar Patel, January 6, 1947.
- 7 Gandhiji's diary, January 2, 1947.
- 8 *Hindusthan Standard*, January 4, 1947.
- 9 Prayer speech, January 6, 1947.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Gandhiji to Harilal Gandhi, January 22, 1947.
- 12 Some sects among the Muslims object to music being played before or in the vicinity of a mosque as being repugnant to their puritanical creed. Proximity of Hindu temples, where playing of music is an essential part of worship, in consequence often gave rise to communal riots out of excess of fanatical zeal on both sides.
- 13 Gandhiji to Shaheed Suhrawardy, January 9, 1947.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Prayer speech, January 6, 1947.
- 16 Gandhiji to Shaheed Suhrawardy, January 9, 1947.
- 17 Manu Gandhi, *Eklo Jane Re*, Ahmedabad, 1954, p. 72.
- 18 In conversation with Manu Gandhi, January 15, 1947.

### CHAPTER VIII

- 1 Amtus Salam to Gandhiji, December 18, 1946.
- 2 Gandhiji's note to Superintendent of Police, Noakhali, January 14, 1947.



- 3 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1946, p. 320.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Young India*, January 22, 1925, p. 27.
- 6 Benet of Canfield in his *Rule of Perfection*, quoted in Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1946, p. 325.
- 7 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, quoted in Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1946, p. 327.
- 8 *Young India*, October 21, 1926, p. 364.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Harijan*, June 22, 1947, p. 200.
- 11 *Harijan*, May 12, 1946, p. 132.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Harijan*, November 24, 1946, p. 409.
- 14 Gandhiji, *Ramanama*, Ahmedabad, 1949, p. 11.
- 15 *Harijan*, June 22, 1947, p. 200.
- 16 *Harijan*, June 2, 1946, p. 158.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Prayer speech, July 2, 1946.
- 19 *Harijan*, April 7, 1946, p. 68.
- 20 Prayer speech, July 2, 1946.
- 21 *Harijan*, March 24, 1946, p. 56.
- 22 *Harijan*, June 2, 1946, p. 168.
- 23 *Harijan*, June 29, 1947, p. 212.
- 24 Manu Gandhi, *Eklo Jane Re*, Ahmedabad, 1954, p. 127.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER IX

- 1 *The Times*, London, February 4, 1947.
- 2 *The Statesman*, January 28, 1947.
- 3 *The Times*, London, February 4, 1947.
- 4 Prayer speech, February 5, 1947.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Prayer speech, February 6, 1947.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Gandhiji to Sardar Patel, February 5, 1947.
- 11 Prayer speech, February 6, 1947.
- 12 Prayer speech, February 7, 1947.
- 13 Prayer speech, February 8, 1947.
- 14 Prayer speech, February 11, 1947.
- 15 Prayer speech, February 7, 1947.



- 16 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 89.
- 17 Prayer speech, February 25, 1947.
- 18 Prayer speech, February 15, 1947.
- 19 Prayer speech, February 11, 1947.
- 20 Prayer speech, February 25, 1947.
- 21 Prayer speech, February 27, 1947.
- 22 *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 4th edition, Madras, p. 336.
- 23 Gandhiji, *From Yeravda Mandir*, Ahmedabad, 1935, p. 90.
- 24 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 68.
- 25 Prayer speech, February 27, 1947.
- 26 Prayer speech, February 26, 1947.
- 27 *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER X

- 1 Manu Gandhi, *Eklo Jane Re*, Ahmedabad, 1954, p. 178.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Prayer speech, February 18, 1947.
- 5 Prayer speech, February 19, 1947.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Prayer speech, February 20, 1947.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Prayer speech, February 21, 1947.
- 10 Prayer speech, February 23, 1947.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Hindusthan Standard*, February 23, 1947.
- 13 *The Times*, London, February 4, 1947.
- 14 Lord Pethick-Lawrence in the House of Lords, February 25, 1947.
- 15 Alan Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten*, London, 1951, p. 1.
- 16 Gandhiji to Sardar Patel, March 3, 1947.
- 17 Gandhiji to Maulana Azad, February 12, 1947.
- 18 Gandhiji to Madame Edmond Privat, February 2, 1947.
- 19 Pandit Nehru to Gandhiji, January 30, 1947.
- 20 Gandhiji to Pandit Nehru, February 6, 1947.

## CHAPTER XI

- 1 Gerald Heard, *The Eternal Gospel*, London, 1946, p. 168.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Gandhiji quoted in Mirabehn, *Gleanings*, Ahmedabad, 1949, p. 19.
- 5 *Harijan*, October 13, 1940, p. 319.
- 6 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 51.
- 7 Gandhiji, *Key to Health*, Ahmedabad, 1948, p. 44.



- 8 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 52.
- 9 *Ibid*, p. 53.
- 10 *Ibid*.
- 11 *Ibid*.
- 12 *Ibid*, p. 49.
- 13 Quoted in Mahadev Desai, *The Gospel of Selfless Action or Gita According to Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, 1946, p. 163.
- 14 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 54.
- 15 *Harijan*, July 23, 1938, p. 192.
- 16 *Ibid*.
- 17 *Ibid*.
- 18 Gandhiji, *Ashram Observances in Action*, Ahmedabad, 1955, p. 55.
- 19 *Harijan*, July 23, 1938, p. 192.
- 20 Gandhiji, *Key to Health*, Ahmedabad, 1948, p. 46.
- 21 *Harijan*, November 14, 1936, p. 316.
- 22 Manu Gandhi, *Eklo Jane Re*, Ahmedabad, 1954, pp. 159-60.
- 23 Gandhiji, *Key to Health*, Ahmedabad, 1948, pp. 43-44.
- 24 *Gandhiji as We Know Him*, edited by C. Shukla, Bombay, 1945, p. 47.
- 25 C. Shukla, *Gandhiji's View of Life*, Bombay, 1951, p. 199.
- 26 Matthew, 19:12 (Knox).
- 27 *Ibid*. (Moffatt).
- 28 *Harijan*, June 5, 1937, p. 134.
- 29 *Ibid*.
- 30 *Harijan*, July 7, 1946, p. 214.
- 31 Gerald Heard to Pyarelal, March 3, 1949.
- 32 *Ibid*.
- 33 *Harijan*, March 28, 1936, p. 53.
- 34 Prayer speech, February 1, 1947.
- 35 Gandhiji to Mirabehn, February 6, 1947.
- 36 Gandhiji to Acharya Kripalani, February 24, 1947.
- 37 Acharya Kripalani to Gandhiji, March 1, 1947.
- 38 Gandhiji, *Key to Health*, Ahmedabad, 1948, pp. 47-48.
- 39 Gandhiji's letter, February 22, 1947.
- 40 *Harijan*, April 24, 1937, p. 88.
- 41 In a letter, February 22, 1947.
- 42 Quoted in Pyarelal's *Mahatma Gandhi—The Early Phase*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, (1965), Vol I, p. 324.
- 43 Gandhiji to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, March 18, 1947.
- 44 *Harijan*, July 23, 1938, p. 192.
- 45 Gandhiji, *Key to Health*, Ahmedabad, 1948, p. 43.
- 46 Mrs. Polak in *Gandhiji as We Know Him*, edited by C. Shukla, Bombay, 1945, p. 47.
- 47 *Ibid*.
- 48 Verrier Elwin in *Mahatma Gandhi (Sketches)* by Kanu Desai.
- 49 Gerald Heard, *The Eternal Gospel*, London, 1946, p. 212.



50 Gerald Heard, *Pain, Sex & Time*, London, 1939, pp. 318-19. See also Romain Rolland, *Prophets of the New India*, New York, 1930, pp. 640-43 on mystic introversion as an instrument of investigation into the nature of the physical universe.

51 *The Living Brain*, London, 1953, p. 46.

52 *Ibid*, p. 17.

53 *Ibid*, p. 19.

54 Gerald Heard, *Pain, Sex & Time*, London, 1939, p. 317.

55 Gerald Heard, *The Eternal Gospel*, London, 1946, p. 214.

56 *Ibid*, p. 212.

57 Gandhiji to Jivanji Desai, April 19, 1947.

58 Gandhiji's letter, April 29, 1947.

59 *Harijan*, June 8, 1947, p. 180.

60 *Harijan*, June 22, 1947, p. 200.

61 *Harijan*, June 8, 1947, p. 180.

62 *Harijan*, June 15, 1947, p. 192.

63 *Harijan*, June 22, 1947, p. 200.

64 *Harijan*, June 29, 1947, p. 212.

65 *Harijan*, July 6, 1947, p. 220.

66 *Harijan*, July 27, 1947, p. 252.

67 *Harijan Bandhu*, July 27, 1947, p. 216.

68 Gandhiji, *Key to Health*, Ahmedabad, 1948, pp. 48-49.

69 *Harijan*, April 18, 1936, p. 77.

70 *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, New York, 1938, p. 603.

71 For paroxysmal and mortificatory techniques for the attainment of sublimation see Gerald Heard's *Pain, Sex and Time*; for the *tantric* way *Shakti and Shakta*, and *Serpent Power* by Arthur Avalon (Sir John Woodroff), Romain Rolland's *Prophets of the New India* and *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by M. The technique employed, so far as it is capable of being explained in terms of modern science in the present state of our knowledge, would appear to depend upon the close interrelationship that is known to exist between the various emotional stimuli and the functioning of the endocrine system.—See *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear, and Rage* by Walter B. Cannon, M.D., S.D., LL.D., D. Appleton and Company, New York and London, (Second edition), 1929, pp. 347, 357 and 375. The Fakir, for instance, chops off his hand and the Shakta uses sex to arouse and mobilise the resources of the endocrine system to attain concentration and realise a wider consciousness. This is how Gerald Heard describes the process:

The Shakta uses sex to dilate consciousness as the Fakir uses pain . . . by foresight and intense continuous self-attention, he holds the mind in a state of detached interest during the paroxysm of excitation. Then the mind would, instead of being swept under by the wave, be carried on its crest far above the high-water mark of normal consciousness. (Gerald Heard, *Pain, Sex and Time*, Cassell and Company Ltd., London, 1939, p. 107).

By surmounting the emotional flood thus released the aspirant, it is



claimed, attains a wider consciousness like a surf-boarder, who from the top of the wave he rides commands a wider view.

The aspirant by arousing, and canalising the resources of the endocrine system provides a "supporting effect" to the emotional mood or religious experience to which he has been conditioned by a course of rigorous preparatory discipline. The "implosion" of the vital energy by the inversion of the paroxysm, when properly canalised under the guidance of a proficient, it is stated, causes all the higher centres of consciousness to be flooded by the surging uprush, awakening new faculties and enlarging the dimensions of the existing ones. This is perhaps an oversimplified and very incomplete version of an extremely subtle and complicated process.

Apart from the antinomian aspect of some of the practices associated with the Shakta school, both these techniques, involving as they do a sudden release and uprush of a very high charge of nervous energy, are admittedly precarious and dangerous in the extreme like an ill-placed high explosive charge that backfires. Whatever results they might be capable of yielding in the hands of proficient, surely they are not for everybody—no more than entering into a steel furnace in order to investigate the physiological effects of high temperatures on man.

72 Romain Rolland, *Prophets of the New India*, New York, 1930, p. 639.

73 *The Celestial Hierarchy*, iii, 2; quoted by Romain Rolland, *Prophets of the New India*, New York, 1930, p. 665.

74 Romain Rolland, *Prophets of the New India*, New York, 1930, p. 641.

75 *Ibid*, p. 642.

76 Gandhiji, *From Yeravda Mandir*, 1935, pp. 68-70.

### PART THREE

#### CHAPTER XII

- 1 Letter dated January 5, 1947.
- 2 Letter dated January 25, 1947.
- 3 Letter dated January 11, 1947.
- 4 Letter dated January 25, 1947.
- 5 Letter dated January 11, 1947.
- 6 Letter dated January 18, 1947.
- 7 Letter dated February 18, 1947.
- 8 Letter dated March 1, 1947.
- 9 Gandhiji to Shaheed Suhrawardy, February 22, 1947.
- 10 Gandhiji to Dr. Syed Mahmud, December 31, 1946.
- 11 Dr. Syed Mahmud to Gandhiji, February 17, 1947.
- 12 Manu Gandhi, under date February 28, 1947.
- 13 Syed Abdul Aziz to Gandhiji, April 21, 1947.



## CHAPTER XIII

- 1 Quoted in Dr. Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided*, Bombay, 1947, p. 147.
- 2 Dr. Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided*, Bombay, 1947, p. 147. See also Brailsford, *Subject India*, Bombay, 1946, p. 101: "There was nothing in this charge (of atrocities); if there had been, the Governors would have interfered—which they never did. British propaganda since the failure of the Cripps Mission has done its utmost to discredit Congress, but it has refrained from repeating this charge of 'persecution', which would have been the most effective weapon it could have used."
- 3 Sir Harry Haig's speech at the Caxton Hall, London, reported in *Pioneer*, Lucknow, April 30, 1946.
- 4 Pandit Nehru's note to Gandhiji on Bihar disturbances, November 6, 1946.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Horace Alexander to Gandhiji, February 1, 1947.
- 7 Pandit Nehru's note to Gandhiji on Bihar disturbances, November 6, 1946.
- 8 K. B. Sahay to Gandhiji, February 24, 1947.
- 9 Pandit Nehru's note to Gandhiji on Bihar disturbances, November 6, 1946.
- 10 *The Statesman*, November 9, 1946.
- 11 *Searchlight*, October 20, 1946.
- 12 Dr. Mahmud's report to Gandhiji, February 17, 1947.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Dr. Syed Mahmud to Gandhiji, November 8, 1946.
- 17 Pandit Nehru's note to Gandhiji on Bihar disturbances, November 6, 1946.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, November 7, 1946.
- 21 *Ibid.*, November 8, 1946.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Pandit Nehru to Gandhiji, January 1, 1947.
- 24 Pandit Nehru to Shaheed Suhrawardy, December 29, 1946.
- 25 These instances have been taken from the report of Mr. Hamid, D.I.G., C.I.D., Bihar, dated January 1, 1947.
- 26 The following were some of the instances reported to the Government: (1) On the 2nd October, 1946, at Keoribigha in the Bihar sub-division, some Harijans of the village were assaulted by the Muslims of the village. They had to flee with the members of their family to the neighbouring villages. (2) On the 4th November, 1946, some of the Muslims, who had assembled in thousands in village Mafi from different villages, made an attack on village Nazampur, killing three Hindus and looting and burning Hindu houses. At this the entire Hindu population vacated the village. (3) On being frightened by the large assemblage of the Muslims at Mafi the Hindus of village Katahri, which is quite close to Mafi, fled away to other villages, leaving



their belongings there. After that the Muslims of Mafi looted the Hindu houses at Katahri on the 7th November, 1946. (4) This Muslim mob of Mafi was in the habit of making attacks every now and then on the neighbouring Hindu villages. On one occasion the mob while returning from its planned attack, encountered the military police who were blocking the way. The military police had to open fire. It was reported that some 14 Muslims were injured by the military firing. Out of these, three succumbed. Eighteen Muslims with deadly weapons and one gun were arrested then and there. These are instances only from one police station. The reports from many other places were similar.

- 27 Dr. Rajendra Prasad to Gandhiji, November 18, 1946.
- 28 Pandit Nehru to Shaheed Suhrawardy, December 29, 1946.
- 29 Pandit Nehru to Shaheed Suhrawardy, January 1, 1947.
- 30 Bihar Government's Press Note, December 25, 1946.
- 31 Shaheed Suhrawardy to Gandhiji, December 15, 1946.
- 32 K. B. Sahay's note to Gandhiji, January 4, 1947.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Syed Abdul Aziz, *Reflections on the Bihar Tragedy*, No. 2, p. 7.

#### CHAPTER XIV

- 1 Bihar Governor to Gandhiji, March 17, 1947.
- 2 Bihar Governor's second letter to Gandhiji, March 17, 1947.
- 3 Bihar Governor to Gandhiji, March 22, 1947.
- 4 Collin Davies, *The Problem of the North-West Frontier*. p. 80.

#### CHAPTER XV

1 A section of the aboriginals were agitating for the creation of a separate Province of Jharkhand for themselves consisting of the districts of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas of Bihar.

- 2 *Divide Bihar*, p. 8.
- 3 *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.
- 4 Syed Abdul Aziz to Gandhiji, April 21, 1947.
- 5 Gandhiji to Syed Abdul Aziz, April 25, 1947.
- 6 Syed Abdul Aziz to Gandhiji, April 26, 1947.
- 7 Dr. Amiya Chakravarty, *A Saint at Work*, Philadelphia, 1950, p. 44.
- 8 Gandhiji to Syed Abdul Aziz, April 28, 1947.
- 9 Syed Abdul Aziz to Gandhiji, April 29, 1947.
- 10 Gandhiji to Syed Abdul Aziz, April 29, 1947.

#### CHAPTER XVI

1 Draft of the agreement sent by Nawab Arbab Sher Akbar Khan with his letter to Gandhiji, May 21, 1947.

- 2 Gandhiji to Sher Akbar Khan, May 21, 1947.



- 3 Sher Akbar Khan to Gandhiji, May 22, 1947.
- 4 Gandhiji to Sher Akbar Khan, May 24, 1947.
- 5 Srikrishna Sinha to Gandhiji, July 13/15, 1947.
- 6 Nawab Mohammad Hussain Khan to Gandhiji, July 2, 1947.
- 7 Gandhiji to Nawab Mohammad Hussain Khan, July 2, 1947.
- 8 Mr. Houlton's note, April 21, 1947.
- 9 Gandhiji's note, April 28, 1947.



## GLOSSARY

- Amavasya: the last day of the dark phase of the moon.
- Arati: adoration by encircling the head of the object adored by lights.
- Atishudra: the lowest of the low.
- Babaji: hermit.
- Badi: homestead or a cluster of homesteads.
- Badmash: a bad character; ruffian.
- Belchas: spades.
- Bhajan: religious song.
- Brahmachari: one who observes continence.
- Brahmacharya: observance of chastity or continence in the quest of Truth, that is, God
- Charkha: spinning-wheel.
- Chowkidar: watchman.
- Dab: tender green coconut.
- Dao: a heavy curved knife universally used in Bengal.
- Darshan: sight; inner vision.
- Dharma: duty.
- Dharmashala: a free travellers' inn endowed by public or private philanthropy.
- Dobas: ponds.
- Fakir: a Muslim recluse.
- Ghee: clarified butter.
- Goala: cowherd.
- Guru: teacher.
- Harijan: literally child of God; a name coined by Gandhiji to describe the so-called untouchables.
- Harinama: name of Hari; God's name.
- Hartal: suspension of work as a mark of protest or mourning.
- Jamadar: watchman; a rank in the police.
- Jehad: religious crusade.
- Kalai: a variety of lentil.
- Kansa: gong.
- Kartal: cymbals.
- Khal: a canal.
- Khol: drum.
- Kirpan: a miniature dagger; the religious symbol of the Sikhs.
- Kirtan: singing hymns in praise of the Lord.
- Kirtanias: professional singers of devotional songs.
- Lathi: a wooden staff or stick.
- Lota: vessel for carrying water.
- Lungi: a short loin-cloth universally worn by Muslims in East Bengal.
- Madrasa: school.
- Maidan: ground, open space.



- Mali: a gardener; in Noakhali dialect, a sweeper.
- Mandap: awning.
- Mantras: sacred verses.
- Maulana: a title of respect applied to learned Muslims.
- Maulvi: a religious preacher.
- Musafirkhana: a travellers' rest-house or inn.
- Namasamkirtan: chanting of God's name.
- Namaz: Muslim prayer.
- Pandal: canvas awning for a public function.
- Patel: village headman.
- Prasad: sacrament distributed at the end of religious worship.
- Purda: veil.
- Ramadhuna: chanting the name of Rama or God.
- Ramanama: the name of Rama—incarnation of God in Hindu religion.
- Sadhana: striving; practice.
- Sadhu: a recluse; mendicant.
- Samadhi: a monument erected over the ashes of the deceased, or the site of cremation.
- Sanyasi or Sannyasi: a recluse
- Sari: a long piece of cloth worn by Indian women.
- Sarvodaya: universal good.
- Sati (same as Sutee): a saintly woman; also a Hindu woman who immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her husband; the practice of Sati.
- Satyagraha: literally, holding on to truth; truth-force or soul-force.
- Satyagrahi: one who practises Satyagraha.
- Sevak: servant.
- Shakti: power.
- Shamiana: a canopy.
- Shanko: a single log bridge with or without side-rails.
- Sherwani: Indian style of coat with closed collar.
- Shimul: an Indian forest tree bearing coloured flowers.
- Shraddha: religious rite among the Hindus to sanctify the memory of the dead.
- Shunyata: void, egoless state
- Sthitaprajna: a man with steady intellect.
- Swadeshi: literally of one's own country. In economics the doctrine of preferential use of the products of one's own country.
- Swaraj: self-rule.
- Takli: distaff or twirligig used for spinning cotton or wool.
- Tal: rhythmic beating of time with the hands during singing.
- Taluqdars: hereditary revenue collectors created under the early British rule in India.
- Tantric: one who believes in Tantra, an Indian school of philosophy which teaches that man must rise through and by means of nature, not by the rejection of nature.
- Tapashcharya: austerity; penance.



Tejas: radiance.

Teta: a many-pronged spear.

Thana: police-station.

Tola: an Indian weight measure; two and a half tolas make one ounce.

Tunai: a process of carding cotton with the fingers.

Unani: Greek system of medicine.

Vaishnava: votary of the cult of Vishnu.

Vaitalik: song of God's praise sung in the morning.

Vanar Gurus: monkey teachers.

Varna: occupational division of Hindu society.

Varnashrama: four divisions of society according to occupations and of life into four stages, viz., student's, householder's, forest dweller's and that of a recluse.

Yajna: sacrifice.

Zamindar: a landlord.

Zenana: the portion of the house specially reserved for women in seclusion.

Zimmis: protected non-Muslim minorities in Islamic polity.



## I N D E X

[Short forms used in the Index are : G. for Gandhiji, C. for Congress, C.A. for Constituent Assembly, J. for Jinnah and M.L. for Muslim League.]

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in search of new techniques and the plans that had begun to form in his mind for setting India on the road to the realisation of the new social order of his dreams in the changed circumstances-an order based upon unity and peace, equality and universal brotherhood and maximum freedom for all. The time had arrived when with all the experience gained and prestige acquired in the course of the Indian struggle for freedom which he had conducted for more than thirty years, Mahatma Gandhi could extend the ambit of his activities and take up causes in even more inauspicious circumstances and hostile conditions and thus prove that Ahimsa could work wonders even in the most adverse of circumstances. At this stage he was taken away. But the horoscope of his experiment is not yet exhausted and the ideas and forces that he has released may yet accomplish after his death things undreamt of and even more marvellous than were witnessed in his lifetime.



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